



Citation for published version:

Pearce, N & Chrisp, J 2021 'The Age Divide in UK Politics: A Working Paper Prepared for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust' Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath.

Publication date:

2021

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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The age divide in UK politics

A working paper prepared
for the Joseph Rowntree
Reform Trust

Dr Joe Chrisp and Professor Nick Pearce

November 2021

The impact of age on voting behaviour and political outcomes has become an issue of increasing political and public interest, particularly in the UK. Registration to vote and turnout rates are much lower for the young than the old, and partisan preferences now differ sharply by age. The 2017 and 2019 general elections saw unprecedented demographic divisions in the electorate between older and younger voters, with those over 50 voting overwhelmingly for the Conservative Party, while the under-35s voted in large numbers for the Labour Party.¹ Pronounced age divisions also marked voter preferences for Leave or Remain in the 2016 Brexit referendum: older voters delivered the narrow majority to 'Leave' the EU against the preference to 'Remain' of most younger voters.

Meanwhile, in many advanced capitalist economies, age related inequalities in wealth have been growing, while levels of welfare state support for retired people and the working-age population have diverged. In the UK, the State Pension and other allowances for older people were protected in real terms in the era of austerity after 2010, whereas there were significant cuts to child benefits, education maintenance support for young people, and the social security entitlements of the working age population. These trends have led to interest in the power of the 'grey vote' and even claims of 'gerontocracy.' Some analysts and academics have speculated that age may become 'the new class' in British politics.²

In this paper, we update a previous analysis³ of the age divide in British politics to examine the trends over recent general elections. We revisit our analysis by interacting turnout by age with other key variables, such as gender, education, ethnicity and housing tenure, before examining how support for the main political parties varies by age. In the final section we respond to a tendency to explain away age differences as either *simply* about education or homeownership by interacting age, education and housing tenure to create 8 sub-groups of voters. We examine their voting patterns and their policy preferences to assess the relative independent weight of each factor in determining the main divides of our politics and the possible direction of travel in future elections. We conclude with a discussion of how the age divide in UK politics is theorised in the political science literature and where it could and should go next.

Turnout, age and the rise of the 'grey vote'

In common with other developed countries, the population of the UK is ageing as a result of increased life expectancy and the demographic bulge caused by the so-called 'baby boomer' generation. The ageing of the parliamentary electorate has also been accompanied by differences in voter registration rates by age, and an increase in the proportion of older voters in the eligible voter population because of inward migration to the UK in recent decades from the EU and elsewhere of young people who are not entitled to vote in general elections.⁴ Using Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, we find that in 2017, over 55s were 38% of the resident adult population but 39.9% of the electorate and over 65s, 23% and 24.5%, respectively.⁵

The growing relative weight of older people in the voting-age population is coupled with considerable inequalities in voter turnout by age. A large age difference in turnout first opened up in the mid 1990s, and it has persisted in recent general elections. Figure 1 shows the probability of turnout by age for UK general elections since 1992.

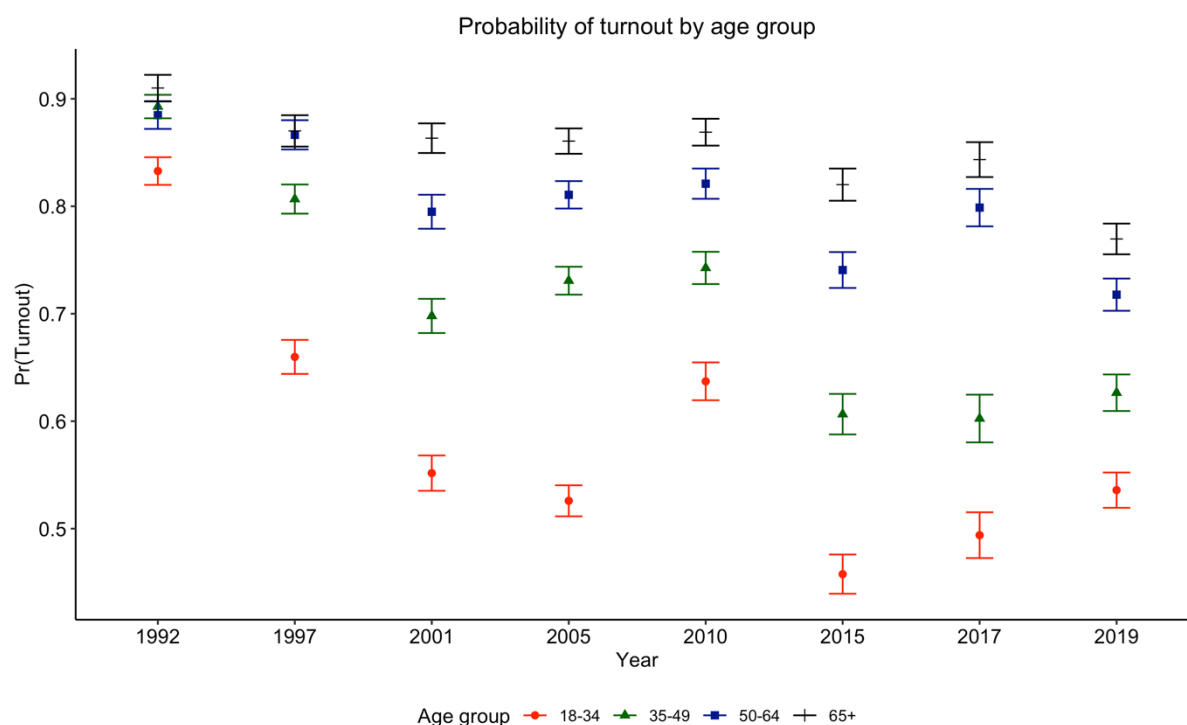


Figure 1: Probability of turnout by age group, 1992 – 2019, with 95% confidence intervals
(Source: British Election Study)

Despite a narrowing of the gap in turnout between younger and older voters at the 2010 general election, significant differences in turnout can be observed throughout the period from 1997 onwards. Although there was speculation that the Labour Party benefited from a ‘youthquake’ at the 2017 general election, studies have suggested that there was no substantial change in turnout by age between the 2015 and 2017 elections.⁶ At the 2019 general election, turnout amongst young and younger middle-aged voters increased compared to 2017, and conversely fell somewhat for older voters, yet age differences in voting were still marked. Table 1 below gives estimates of turnout by age for Great Britain at the 2019 election using the 2019 British Election Study (BES) Post-Election Random Probability Survey.⁷

Table 1: Great Britain (NI excluded): 2019 General Election (Random probability survey⁸ N= 3946)

Turnout by age	18-34	35-49	50-64	65+
	53.6%	62.6%	71.8%	77%

In our previous analysis of the 2017 election,⁹ we pointed out that the correlation between official turnout and age at the constituency-level was weaker than the correlation between the quasi-registration rate and age. We calculated the quasi-registration rate by dividing the number of registered voters in a constituency by the estimated adult population in the constituency using ONS experimental data. This therefore includes both those who are not registered due to inaction or choice and those who are not registered because they are not entitled to vote. We replicated this for 2019 and found the same pattern, albeit with a less pronounced difference. Figure 2 shows a moderate negative correlation (-0.392) between official turnout rates and the proportion of young people in

a constituency, while Figure 3 shows a strong negative correlation (-0.700) between quasi-registration rates and the proportion of young people.

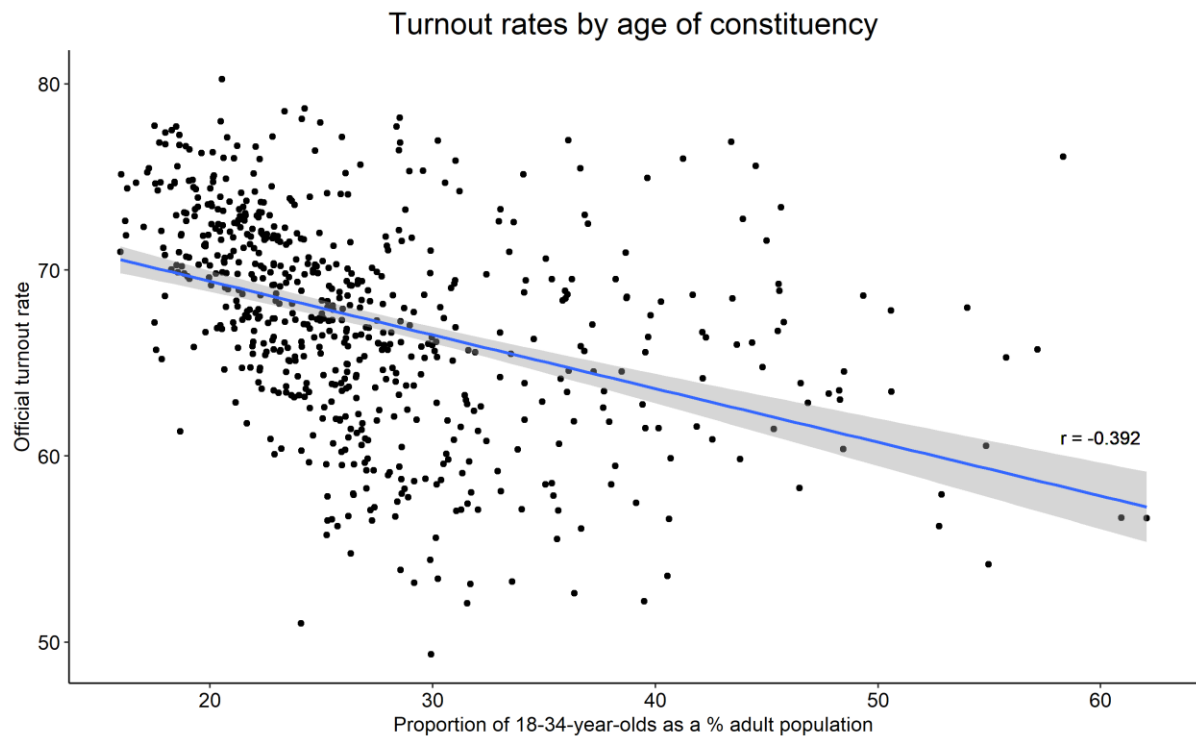


Figure 2: The relationship between official turnout rates in a constituency and the proportion of 18-34 year olds as a percentage of the adult population

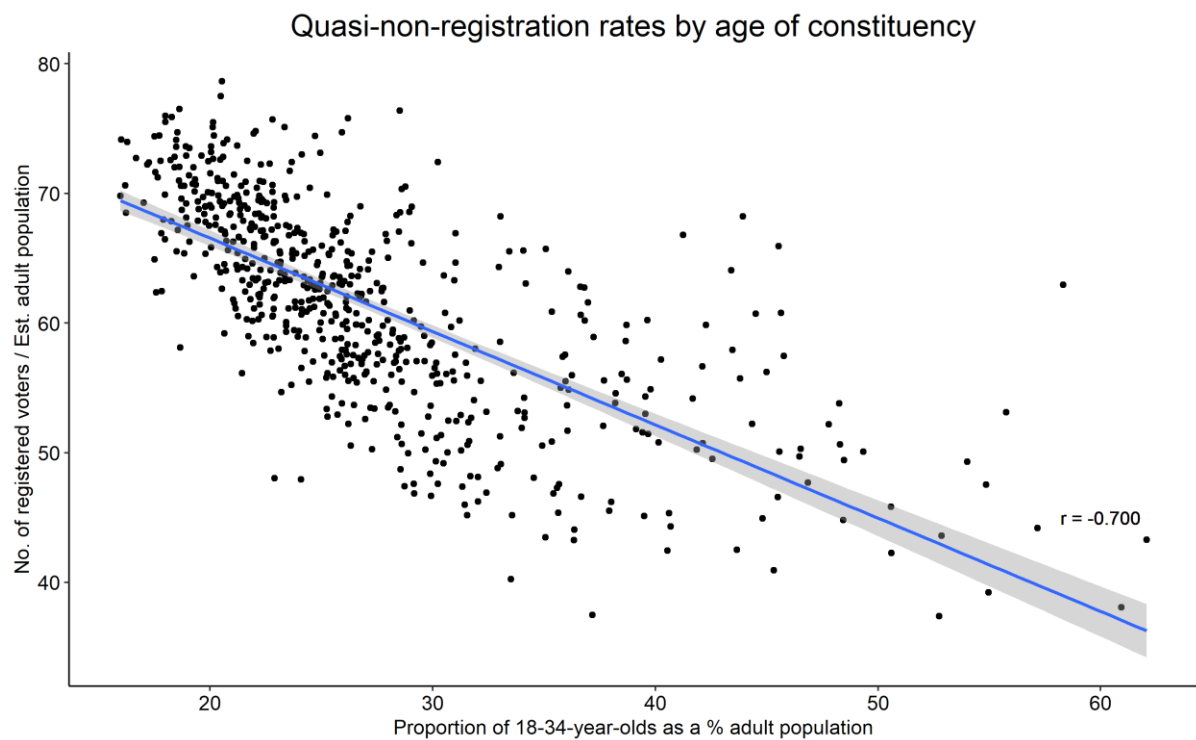


Figure 3: The relationship between the number of registered voters in a constituency as a percentage of the adult population and the proportion of 18-34 year olds.

We can also look at how age interacts with housing tenure, education levels, gender and ethnicity in the probability of turning out to vote. Housing tenure, education and ethnicity correlate strongly with age: older people are more likely to own their home and less likely to have gone to university and have a BAME background. The interactions thus help to disentangle some of the different effects. Figures 4-7 show the interactions across multiple elections using a binary indicator of age (18-54 & 55+), while Figures A1-4 in the Appendix show the interactions for the 2019 election using a continuous measure of age.

Figure 4 shows that both housing tenure and age have an independent effect on the likelihood to turnout: homeowners are consistently more likely to vote than those in rented accommodation whatever their age, and turnout rates for both homeowners and renters increase with age across all elections from 1992-2019. From 1997-2005, the turnout of older renters surpassed that of younger homeowners, while since 2010 younger homeowners have been at least marginally more likely to turnout than older renters. Broadly, both of these groups have voted at relatively similar rates to older homeowners as compared to younger renters whose turnout has remained by far the lowest amongst all groups. Yet, at the 2019 election, there was a noticeable fall in turnout amongst older renters, to below 60%. The longer-term trend of lower turnout among older renters could be a compositional effect, in that they are a smaller and smaller minority within their cohort (a factor we return to later), but the sizeable shift from 2017 to 2019 would suggest something more specific and perhaps short-term. Nevertheless, the evidence now points to homeownership being a more important factor in determining turnout than age (see also Figure A1 in Appendix).

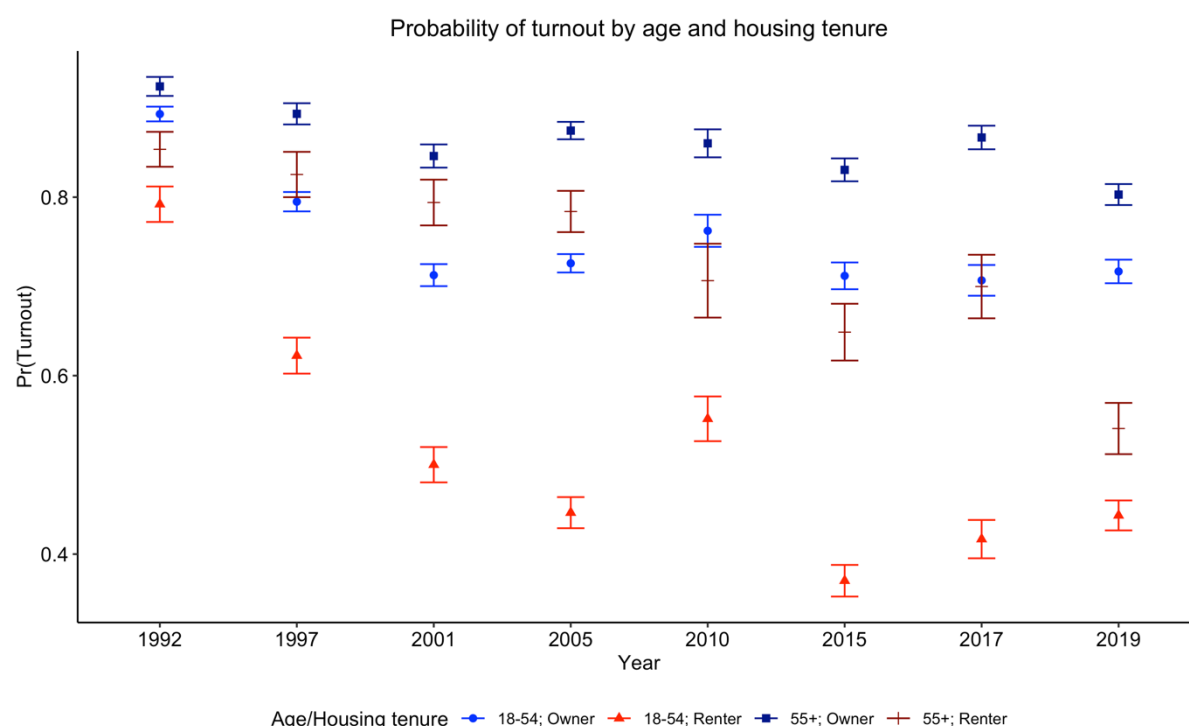


Figure 4: Probability of turnout by age and housing tenure, 1992 – 2019 (Source: British Election Study)

We find a similar relationship between age, education and the probability of voting. Figure 5 shows that, at every age, those with degrees are more likely to vote than non-graduates. The lowest levels of turnout are amongst young voters with lower levels of

educational attainment. However, as with older renters, we see a decline in the turnout of older non-graduates between the 2017 and 2019 general elections so that younger graduates were more likely to vote than older non-graduates for the first time. Figure A2 in the Appendix shows the results for age and education, dividing non-graduates into those with A-levels or equivalent and those GCSEs or lower, for the 2019 general election.

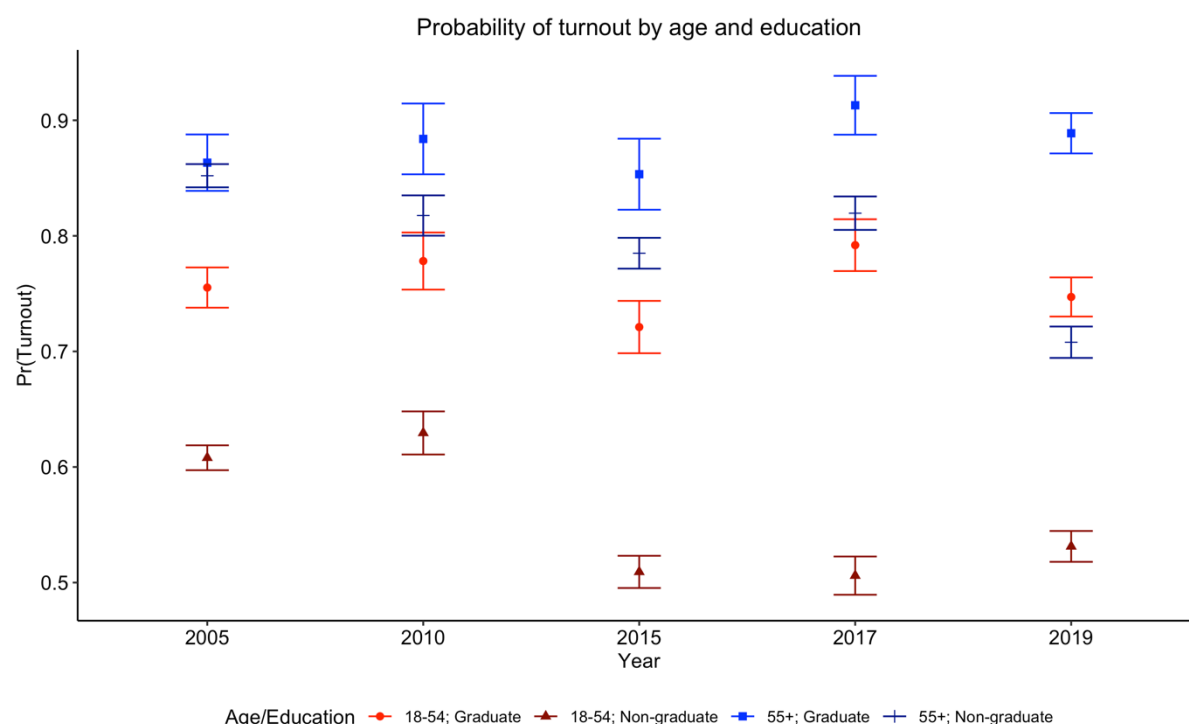


Figure 5: Probability of turnout by age and education, 2005 - 2019 (Source: British Election Study)

In contrast to housing tenure and education, there have been very limited gender differences in turnout by age in recent elections. Figure 6 shows the probability of turnout by gender and age from 1992 to 2019. Other than in 1992, 1997 and 2005 when younger women were statistically more likely to turnout than younger men, there were no other gender-related differences in turnout for either age group prior to 2019. However, the 2019 general election marked the first time that men were statistically more likely to vote than women, primarily due to the greater turnout of younger men (see also Figure A3).

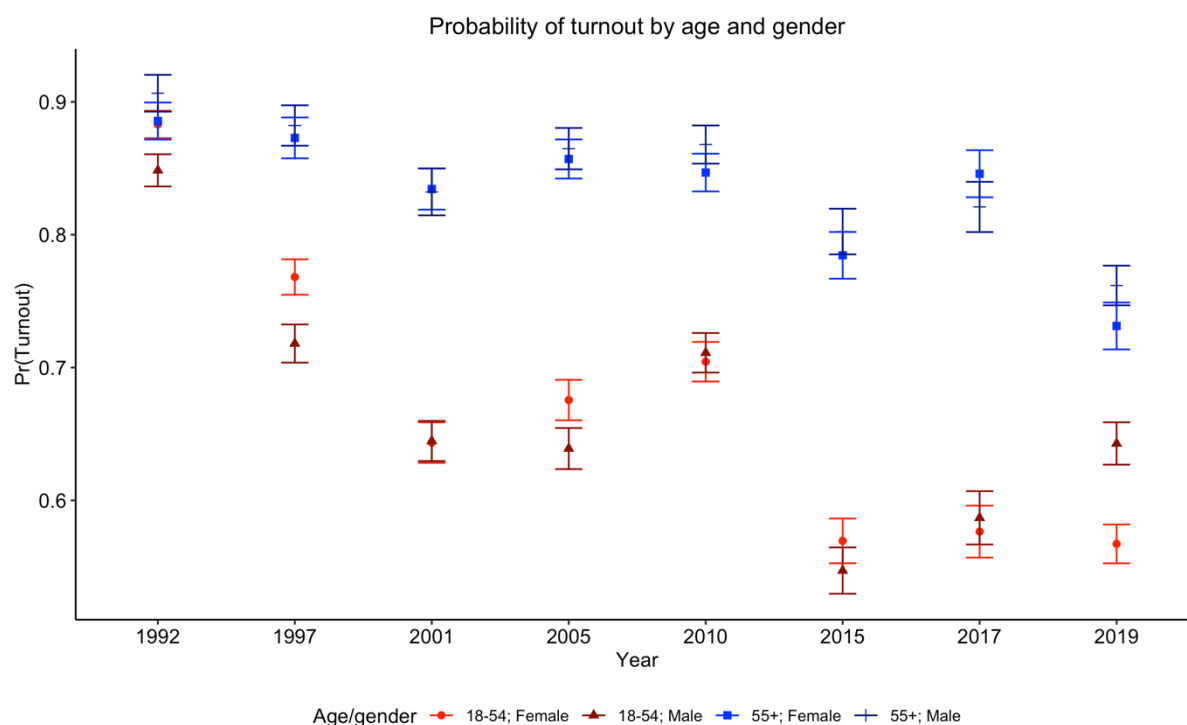


Figure 6: Probability of turnout by age and gender, 1992 – 2019 (Source: British Election Study).

Finally, Figure 7 shows that while ethnicity explains turnout to an extent, in that white people are more likely to vote, this is dwarfed by the differences in voting by age *within* the BAME groups of voters. In the 2019 election, there was not a significant difference between older white and BAME voters in their propensity to vote, although this was largely due to the smaller sample of older BAME voters leading to a less precise estimate (see Figure A4 in Appendix). The largest difference by ethnicity within an age group was in 2010, when younger BAME voters were particularly unlikely to vote (c.50%) vis-à-vis younger white voters (c.70%).

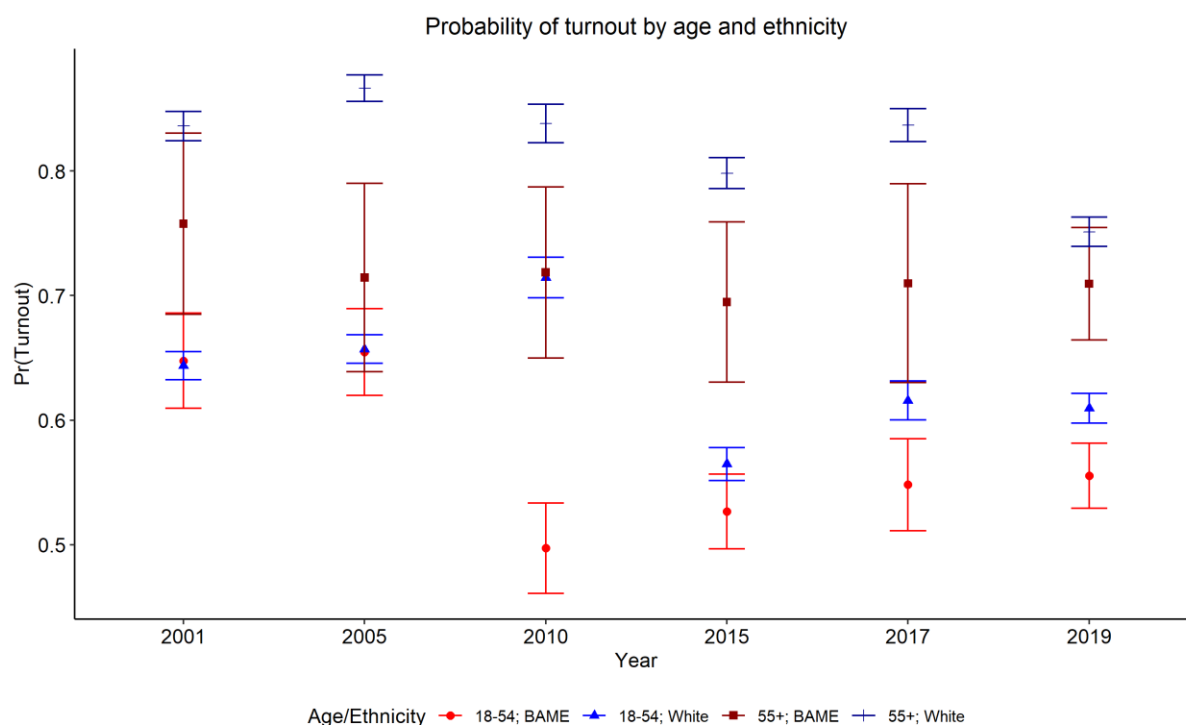


Figure 7: Probability of turnout by age and ethnicity, 2001 – 2019 (Source: British Election Study).

Scotland and Wales

Motivated by the question of whether the supply-side of politics can help to explain these differences, we explore turnout at the sub-national level as well. Inequalities in turnout by age have also been clearly visible in elections in Scotland and Wales in recent years. Figure 8 shows turnout by age in the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, at subsequent Scottish and UK Parliamentary elections, and at the Brexit referendum. The independence referendum witnessed significantly higher levels of democratic participation in Scotland than at any other recent election or referendum. A very high figure of 84.6% of the registered electorate voted in the independence referendum (and some 109,593 16- and 17-year-olds were newly registered to vote). Participation at subsequent elections has been lower and was lowest for young people (18-34 years old) at the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections. The age gap narrowed at the 2019 general election as the turnout of older voters declined, and that of young people rose.

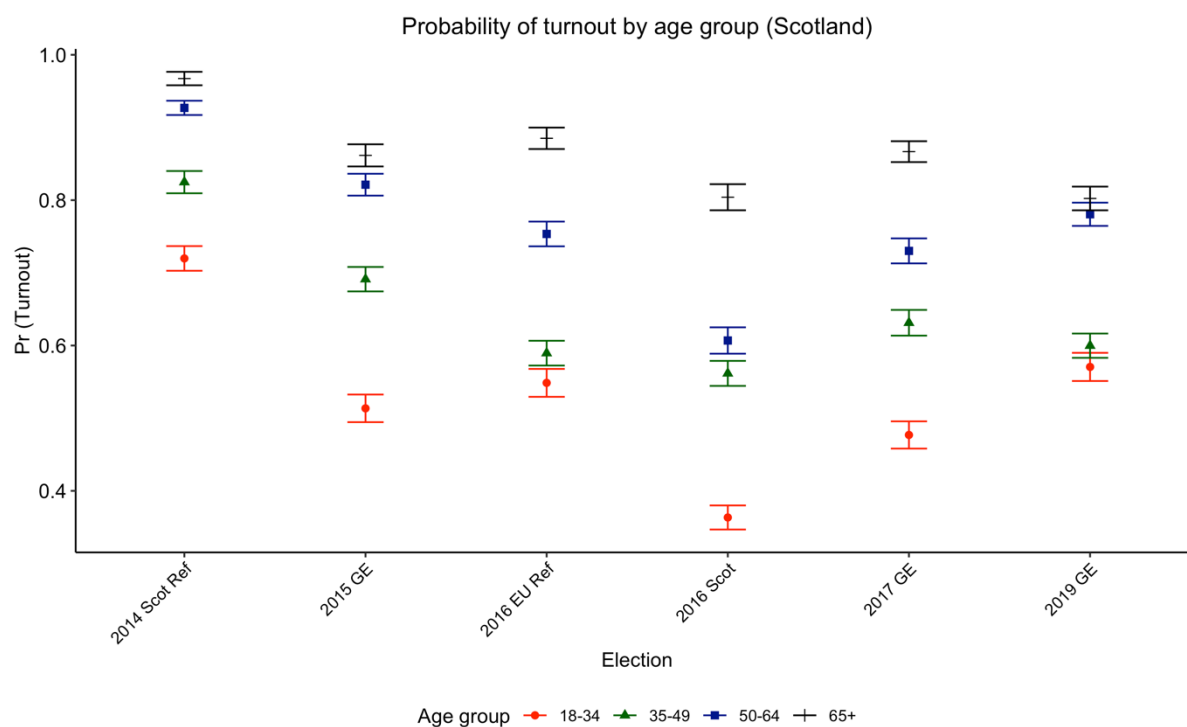


Figure 8: Turnout by age groups, elections and referenda in Scotland, 2014 -2019 (Source: British Election Study Internet Panel Survey, authors' own weighting¹⁰)

In Wales, similar patterns emerge over recent years – a marked age gap in probability of turnout, with the lowest turnout figures recorded for the 2016 Welsh Assembly elections, followed by a narrowing of age differences at the 2019 general election.

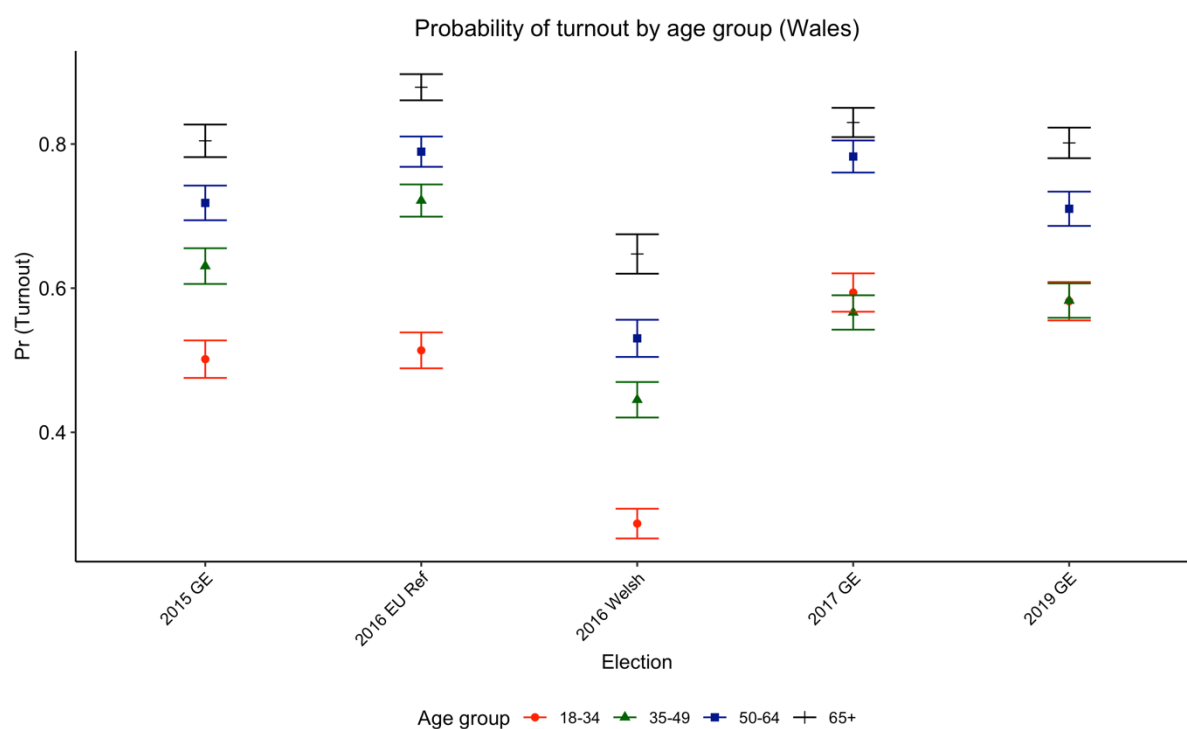


Figure 9: Probability of turnout by age groups in Wales, 2014 – 2019 (Source: British Election Study Internet Panel Survey, authors' own weightings)

Interestingly, while the probability of being satisfied with democracy demonstrates similar age differences as turnout at elections at the level of the UK as a whole – older voters being more satisfied (Figure 10) – the young and middle aged express greater satisfaction with Scottish democracy than older age groups (Figure 11), which may reflect attitudes towards devolution but are not evident in higher turnout. The picture for Wales is a mixed one (see Figure A5), again suggesting satisfaction with democracy is not the explanation of turnout differences.

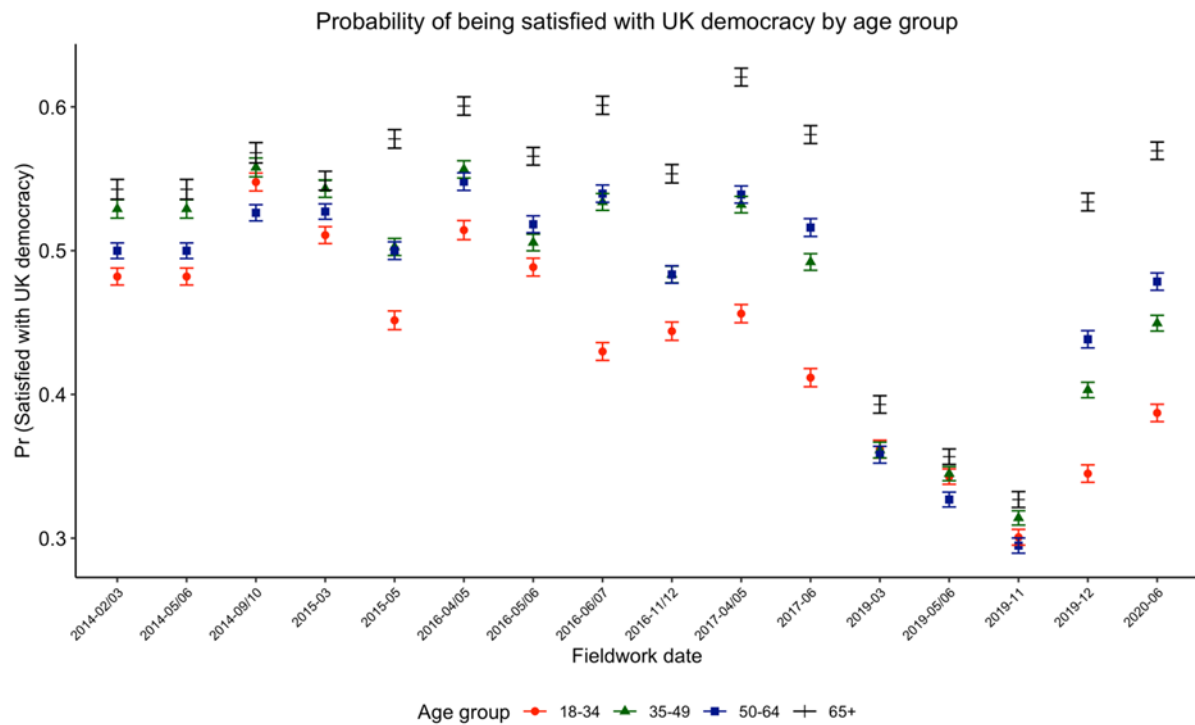


Figure 10: Probability of being satisfied with UK democracy by age group (Source: British Election Study Internet Panel Survey)

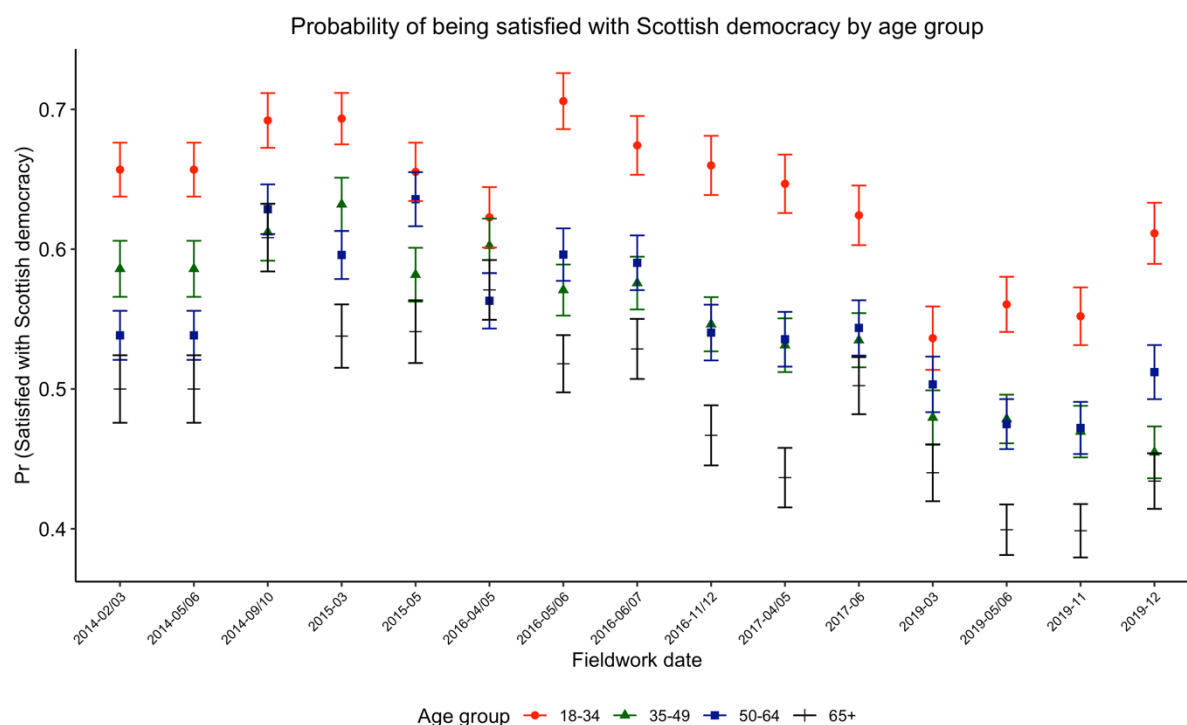


Figure 11: Probability of being satisfied with Scottish democracy by age group (Source: British Election Study Internet Panel Survey)

Age, political preferences and vote choice

The electoral power of older voters is only likely to be significant if their political preferences and vote choices differ substantially from the rest of the electorate. Recent evidence suggests this is indeed the case. In the Brexit referendum, and the 2017 and 2019 general elections, there were very considerable differences in preferences according to age.

Figure 12 shows the probability of voting Conservative by age group since 1992. The gap in voting Conservative by age starts to widen in 2001 and is considerable in 2017. Figure 13 shows the same probability of voting Labour by age. Both figures show that 2019 was, to a large extent, a continuation of the age divide found in 2017. However, one of the most striking shifts from 2017 to 2019 is among 50-64 year olds, the only age group for which there is a significant increase in voting Conservative and the age group with the largest decrease in voting Labour.

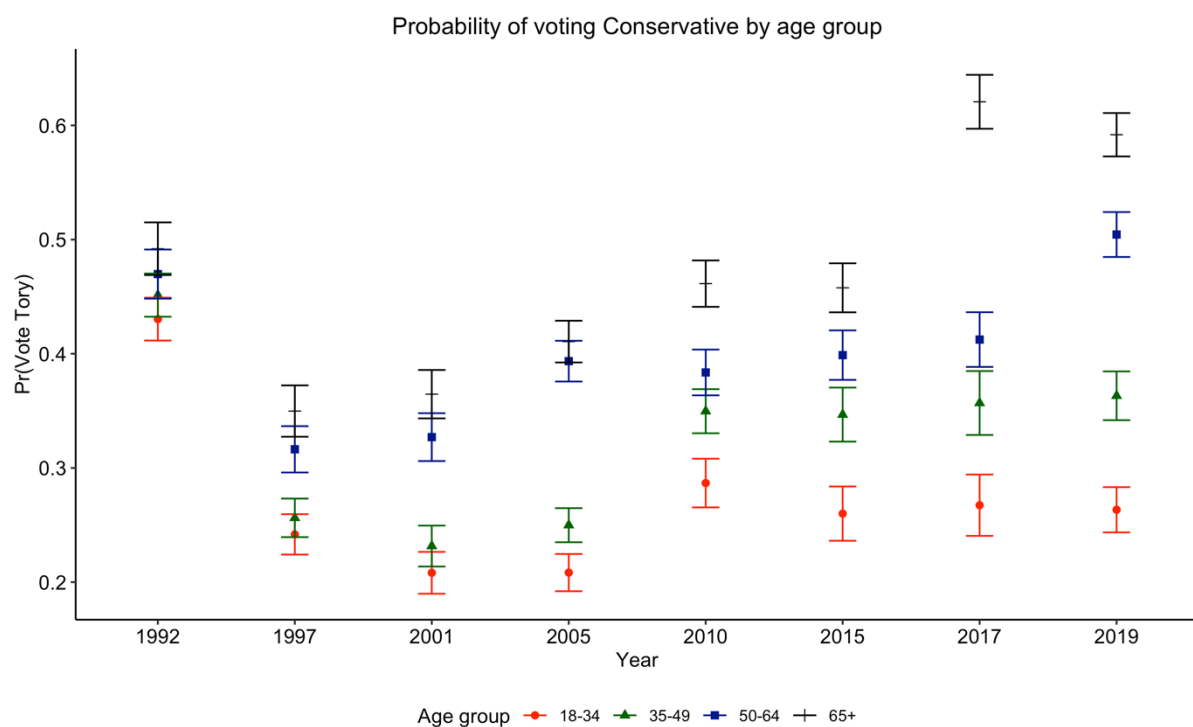


Figure 12: Probability of voting Conservative by age group, 1992 – 2019 (Source: British Election Study)

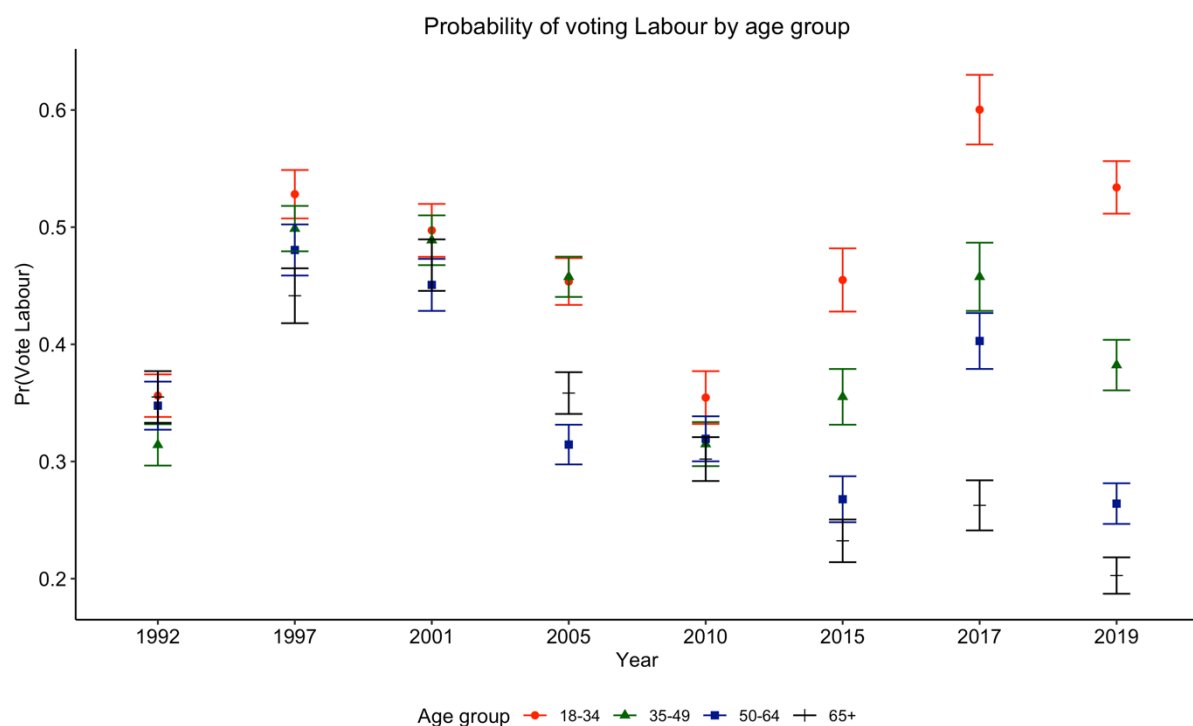


Figure 13: Probability of voting Labour by age group, 1992 – 2019 (Source: British Election Study)

Using British Election Study (BES) data, Tables 2 and 3 show how each age group voted in the Brexit referendum and the 2017 general election respectively. Table 4 analyses

age and party choice for the 2019 election, using the 2019 British Election Study (BES) Post- Random Probability Survey.

Table 2: EU referendum vote by age group (n=1695; non-voters excluded; demographic weights)

EU referendum	18-34	35-49	50-64	65+	Total
Remain	66.9%	50.1%	43.5%	37.9%	49.5%
Leave	33.1%	49.9%	56.6%	62.1%	50.5%

Table 3: 2017 general election vote by age group (n=1616; non-voters excluded; self-reported vote weights)

2017 vote	18-34	35-49	50-64	65+	Total
Labour	60.0%	45.8%	40.3%	26.3%	41.0%
Conservatives	26.7%	35.7%	41.2%	62.1%	43.5%
Lib Dems	7.5%	10.5%	7.8%	5.4%	7.6%
Other	5.8%	8.1%	10.7%	6.3%	7.9%

Table 4: 2019 general election vote by age group (Random probability survey¹¹ N= 3946)

2019 vote	18-34	35-49	50-64	65+
Conservatives	26.3%	36.3%	50.4%	59.2%
Labour	53.4%	38.2%	26.4%	20.3%
Lib Dems	11.1%	13.0%	11.5%	11.9%
SNP	3.7%	6.4%	4.0%	2.3%
Plaid Cymru	0.4%	0.9%	0.5%	0.3%
Green	3.2%	3.0%	3.4%	1.7%
Brexit	1.5%	0.9%	2.3%	3.1%
Other / DK	0.4%	1.2%	1.5%	1.3%

Explaining the age divide – ‘cultural backlash’ and identity groups

While age has long been an important factor in British politics, the 2017 general election marked an unprecedented level of polarisation. There is an obvious hypothesis for this, which is that 2017 was a ‘Brexit election’ – an issue on which, as we have seen, voters are also deeply polarised by age.¹² Support for the Conservative Party rose markedly amongst older Leave voters, assisted by the collapse of UKIP support, while Labour increased its vote share amongst working age Remain voters significantly more than it did amongst Leave voters.¹³ This pattern was repeated at the 2019 general election: 80% of Conservative voters were Leave supporters in 2019, while a similar proportion of Labour voters were Remain supporters.¹⁴

It is the importance of the Brexit cleavage that leads many to explain age differences in voting by reference to a “cultural backlash” – the title of an important recent work by

Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris.¹⁵ The cultural backlash thesis maintains that recent 'populist' votes such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, represent a conservative reaction against the 'silent revolution' in the cultural values of advanced societies like the UK towards social liberalism. Western societies have become more socially liberal on many issues and this has stimulated a backlash amongst voters holding authoritarian and conservative values. These values are strongest amongst older birth cohorts, particularly the interwar generation. In post-industrial areas characterised by low income and high unemployment, the authoritarian reflex against cultural change is accelerated by economic insecurity; material hardship sharpens the appeal of authoritarian-populist actors and anti-immigrant, anti-elite sentiments. But fundamentally, it is cultural values, not class or economics that explains the age differences in vote choice.

A similar account is given by Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford in their recent work.¹⁶ Sobolewska and Ford argue that generational differences in values, identities and political preferences have arisen from two key social trends in the UK. First, educational expansion has opened up universities, formerly the preserve of an elite, to mass participation, driving up the proportion of young and middle-aged voters who have gone into higher education. Second, migration and ethnic pluralisation in recent decades have significantly increased Britain's ethnic and cultural diversity. The combined effect of these two trends, Ford and Sobolewska argue, is to have transformed the typical experience of a young person growing up in Britain. Most citizens growing up in the 1950s did not go to university and had little or no contact with people from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. In contrast, young people growing up in the 21st century live in a society where ethnic and religious diversity are taken for granted and university is an experience enjoyed by the majority of their peers. The generational structure of both these changes, and hence of the identities and values associated with them, drives a growing divide between younger 'identity liberals' and older 'identity conservatives.' The latter embrace an ethnocentric worldview, rejecting ethnic diversity and resenting the loss of cultural conformity and continuity which once gave them a dominant status. Furthermore, the geographical distribution of different demographic groups – of young, well-educated and diverse populations who live in cities and university towns, and older, predominantly white and lower skilled populations living in post-industrial towns and coastal areas – adds to the electoral polarisation between identity groups 'who not only think differently, but also increasingly live apart from each other'.¹⁷

Importantly, Sobolewska and Ford do not argue that 'demography is destiny.' The political consequences of these demographic trends are contingent. Demographic shifts 'change the *electoral resources* available to parties and open up the *potential* for new political conflicts to emerge' but do not determine the choices political parties make.' Different political responses to the same demographic trends can lead towards divergent political outcomes, as illustrated by the very different ways demographic divides and identity conflicts have been mobilised in Scotland compared to England and Wales.¹⁸

As Figures 14-15 show, education, as a potential driver of value conflicts, has not been a consistent divide in voting. While the long-term trend of graduates shifting from right to left and non-graduates from left to right is striking and replicated across most advanced democracies¹⁹, as recently as the 2015 and 2017 elections there were mostly insignificant differences between graduates and non-graduates *within* age groups in their propensity

to vote Conservative or Labour (only older non-graduates were more likely to vote Conservatives than older graduates in 2017). Thus, the extent of the education divide in 2019 stands out and points to the importance of election-specific 'supply side' factors.

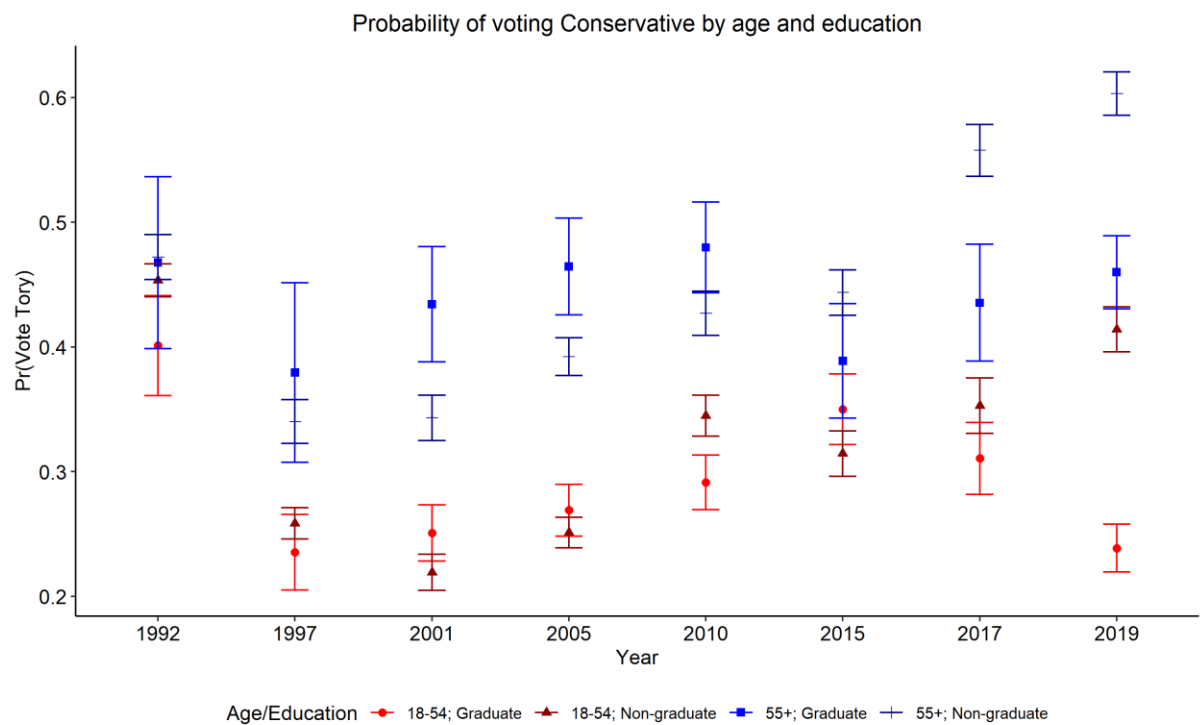


Figure 14: Probability of voting Conservative by age group (18-54; 55+) and education (graduate; non-graduate) 1992-2019

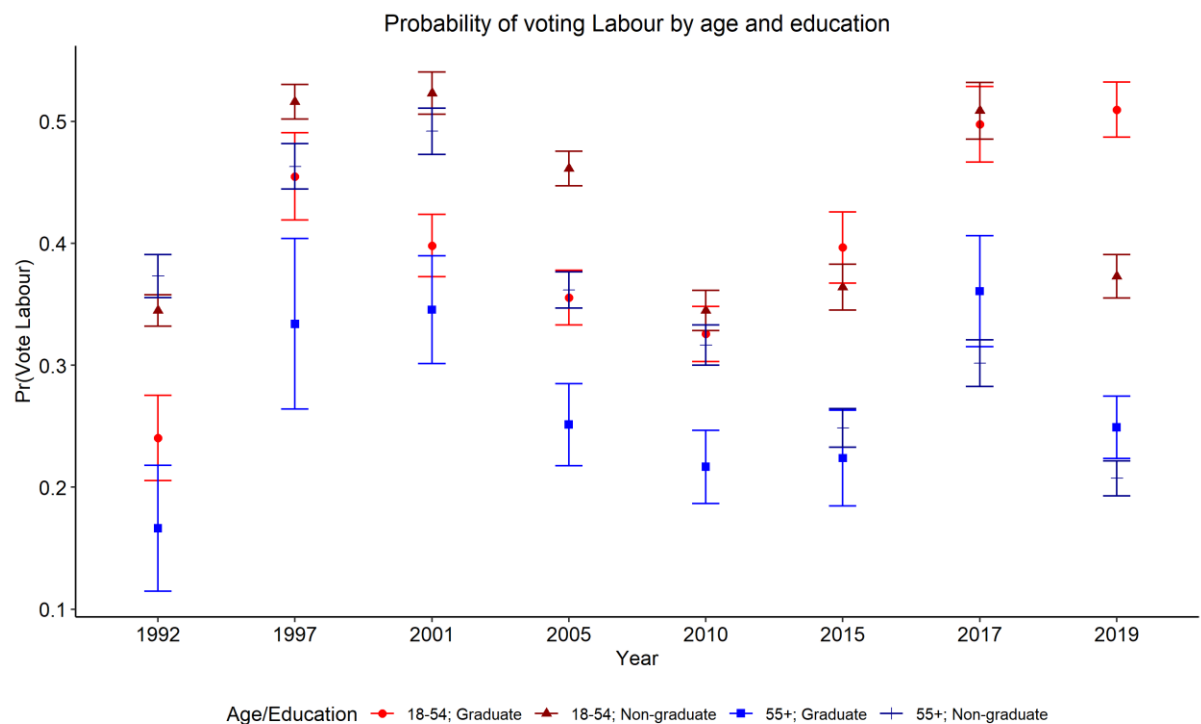


Figure 15: Probability of voting Labour by age group (18-54; 55+) and education (graduate; non-graduate) 1992-2019

This theme of how the 'supply side' of electoral politics shapes the relationship between values, social class and age is taken up in a recent working paper by Leo Azzolini and Geoffrey Evans.²⁰ In this paper, Azzolini and Evans argue that ideological convergence between the main political parties on economic and social liberal positions disproportionately depresses the turnout of the working class, and the class of self-employed and small business owners. Consensus between the major parties is associated with declining turnout among citizens in these social classes who hold economically left-wing and socially authoritarian values that are not given expression in mainstream politics. This 'class gap' in turnout interacts with an 'age gap': divisions in turnout between classes are primarily found amongst younger voters who are less socialised or integrated into the political system. Turnout is depressed among younger cohorts for the authoritarian self-employed, and even more so amongst the economically left-wing and authoritarian working class.

Azzolini and Evans argue that their findings demonstrate that ideological convergence acts as 'a powerful vehicle of political inequality: on one hand, it drives gaps in turnout between young individuals across social classes by up to 20%. In this case, social stratification extends to political participation, depressing the participation of one of the most disadvantaged sections of British society. On the other hand, it drives gaps in turnout between young and old individuals, with this gap reaching up to 50% within the working class. Considering age-class groups separately, under ideological convergence young members of the working class are a staggering 55% less likely to vote than older members of the middle class.'²¹

Economic geography, wealth and assets

In contrast to these accounts, political economy explanations of age divides in values and political preferences place the transition to the digitalised knowledge economy at the heart of new 'cultural' political divisions. Torben Iversen and David Soskice argue that advanced capitalism's primary asset is specialised knowledge, which is embedded in the social networks of co-located, highly educated, and relatively immobile skill clusters.²² The process of skill agglomeration in post-industrial economies means that urban centres which attract young, well-educated people expand and thrive, while towns and rural areas that are disproportionately old and lower skilled fall behind. This leads to the emergence of distinct winners and losers, formed along geographical, age and educational cleavages: the winners are the young, educated workers in the urban knowledge economy, while the losers are older, lower skilled workers of the post-industrial towns and counties. Authoritarian cultural values of the older population derive from this economic reality, as do the liberal, permissive views of younger people: "'postmaterialists' and 'populists' are 'rooted in different parts of the modern economy and it is impossible to detach their values from this underlying reality'".²³

A similar approach is taken by Will Jennings & Gerry Stoker who relate the economic decline of English and Welsh constituencies to a long-term shift towards voting Conservative. Places that have experienced relative decline have become more 'closed', while those that have enjoyed growth in the knowledge economy have become more liberal and 'open'. The Conservatives have seen their vote share rise in the former; Labour in the latter.²⁴

These accounts usefully reject unhelpful dichotomies between ‘culture’ and ‘economics.’ But as they ground cultural values and political preferences in the material interests, occupations and economic geography produced by the transition from the industrial or Fordist economy to the knowledge economy, they tend to associate older voters with ‘left behind’ areas and/or industrial occupations. Yet this is hard to reconcile with the substantial evidence of the relative economic prosperity of older voters in the UK: their historically high levels of housing and pension wealth, and the increase in their living standards in recent decades, particularly when compared to younger people in the period since the financial crisis in 2008.²⁵

Recent work by Jane Green and Raluca L. Pahontu on the relationship between wealth, risk aversion and preparedness to support change in the status quo offers important insights into this issue.²⁶ Green and Pahontu study the relationship between household wealth and voting for Leave or Remain in the Brexit referendum. They argue that holding wealth, particularly in the form of home ownership, insures against risk and provides economic security, enabling the wealthy to support changes to the status quo, such as Brexit, in the belief that they are insulated from its economic consequences. Conversely, those lacking wealth cannot so readily support their preferences if these entail changes to the status quo against which they are not insured. Green and Pahontu argue that, ‘...variation in personal wealth enables wealthier individuals to support Brexit, and less wealthy individuals to support Remain. We provide evidence that the mechanism linking wealth and higher Leave support is via wealthy voters’ expectation that Brexit would not impact their personal finances, and we show that an increase in wealth lowers risk-aversion...Wealth insures against the risks associated with a change to the status quo. This means that while many poorer individuals may have held a preference for Leave, they were less likely to vote for Brexit given their lack of economic insurance.’²⁷

Housing, home ownership and age

These results suggest that we need to develop a fuller political economy explanation of the age divides in the electorate and, in particular, the interests of older voters in their economic security. In the rest of this paper, we focus on one aspect of this question: housing wealth. Cohort effects in the accumulation of housing wealth have led to very high rates of home ownership – above 75% – amongst the current generation of over ‘65s. In economic policy preferences, this may predispose older people to vote for parties that they perceive will protect the value of housing assets in the economy, leave untaxed their housing wealth, or allow them to express other policy preferences, such as on immigration, in the belief that their wealth will insure them against risks. We might then expect to see social class differences emerge in the preferences of older voters depending on whether they rent or own their own properties.

In their recent study of the relationship between house prices, housing markets and vote choice, Ansell and Adler find a strong correlation between home ownership, age and voting Conservative at the 2017 general election: ‘whereas among renters (in private and social housing) age is essentially unrelated to vote choice, among homeowners there is a striking difference of around 30 per cent as we move from people in their twenties to people in their eighties’.²⁸ The authors explain the fact that age increases the likelihood of voting Conservative for homeowners by pointing to the varying levels of equity that individuals will have at different points in their life. Older people are more likely to own a

large share of their property or own it outright. They have more housing wealth than young people and less risk of negative equity.

Figure 16 shows the relationship between voting Conservative and age/housing tenure since 1992. Older homeowners are consistently more likely to vote Conservative. At the 2019 general election, for the first time, older renters were more likely to vote Conservative than younger (18-54) owners – reflecting the shift away from Labour amongst older voters in so-called ‘Red Wall’ seats.

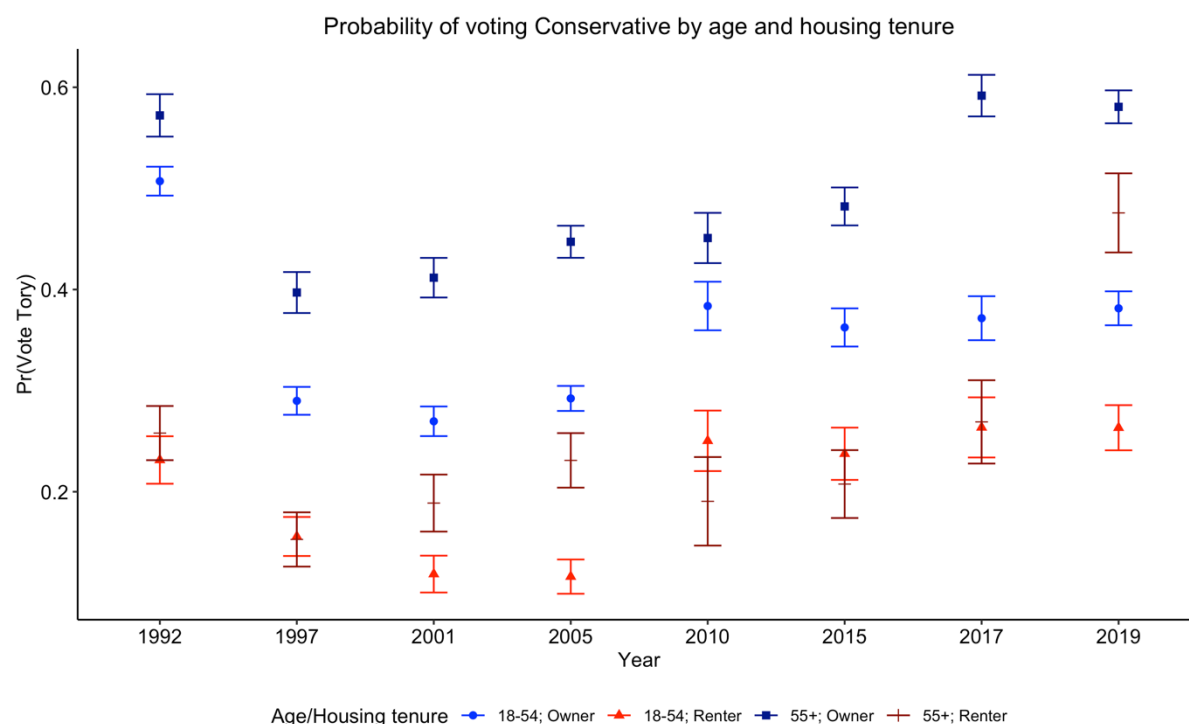


Figure 16: Probability of voting Conservative by age group (18-54; 55+) and housing tenure (owner; renter) 1992-2019

However, the relative size of homeowners and renters in different age cohorts has changed considerably in recent decades. Using data compiled by the Resolution Foundation from the Family Expenditure Survey prior to 1984, and Labour Force Survey for subsequent years, we can show homeownership rates for different age groups between 1961 and 2017. Figure 17 shows that the proportion of over 65s who are homeowners has increased continually since 1970. It now stands at over 75%.

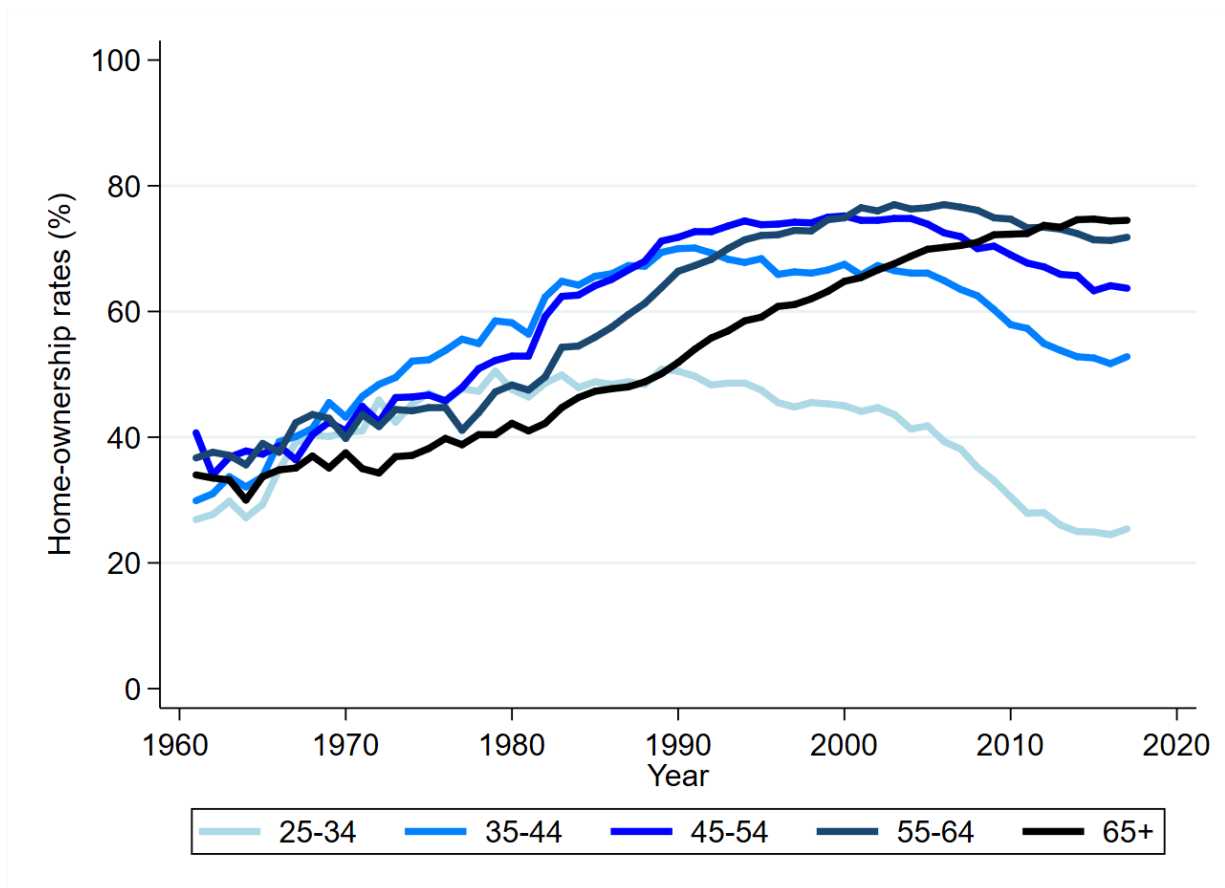


Figure 17: Home-ownership rates by age group of household (25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65+). Source: Resolution Foundation, FES 1961-1983, LFS 1984-2017

This is largely driven by generational differences: baby boomers were able to get on the housing ladder and buy housing cheaply in their youth, amassing housing wealth during the long asset boom that started in the 1970s.

Age, tenure and education: an interactive approach to voting and non-voting

We can probe the relationship between older people's voting preferences, homeownership and education more fully by adopting a novel approach of interacting age, housing tenure *and* education to develop clusters of voters according to the following 8 sub-groups:

- (1) Older (55+), non-graduate, renters
- (2) Older (55+), graduate, renters
- (3) Younger (18-54), non-graduate, renters
- (4) Younger (18-54), graduate, renters
- (5) Older (55+), non-graduate, homeowners
- (6) Older (55+), graduate, homeowners
- (7) Younger (18-54), non-graduate, homeowners
- (8) Younger (18-54), graduate, homeowners

Note: "renters" is short-hand for anyone that doesn't own the home they live in, so includes those living with family and friends.

Starting with voters only, Figure 18 shows that for all sub-groups where 2 of the 3 socio-demographic factors are “Tory-friendly”, a majority or plurality of voters backed the Conservatives, while 63% of older, owner, non-graduates voted Conservative. The same applies for Labour (with 54% of younger, renter, graduates voting Labour), other than older renter graduates, 41% of whom voted Conservative. However, this sub-group represents <1% of voters.

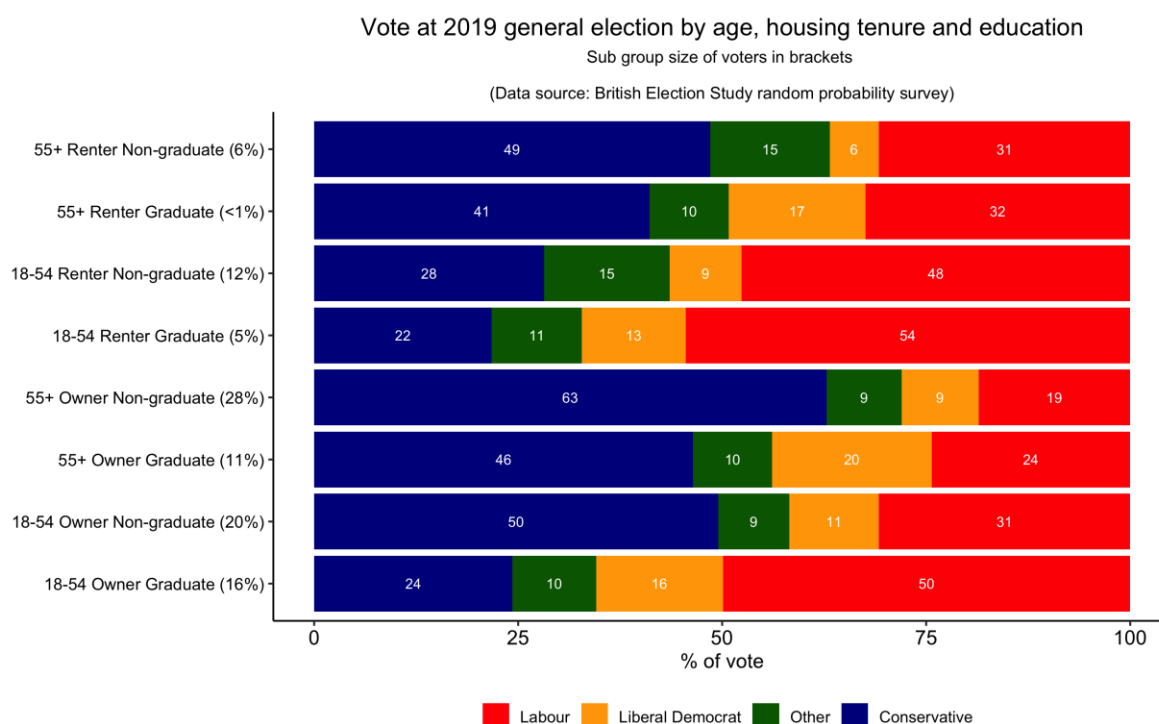


Figure 18: Share of votes for the major parties at 2019 general election by age-education-tenure sub-group, excluding non-voters (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2019)

However, looking at the 2017 election in Figure 19, we can see that only 4 years ago Labour got a majority or plurality of nearly every sub-group other than older homeowners. Thus, the 2019 election saw a collapse of Labour’s support among non-graduates regardless of age and housing tenure. Interestingly, the fact that the Conservative still won in 2017 also highlights why examining voting in this way is a partial story. This can be explained by at least two important factors: the absolute size of each sub-group and non-voting or turnout.

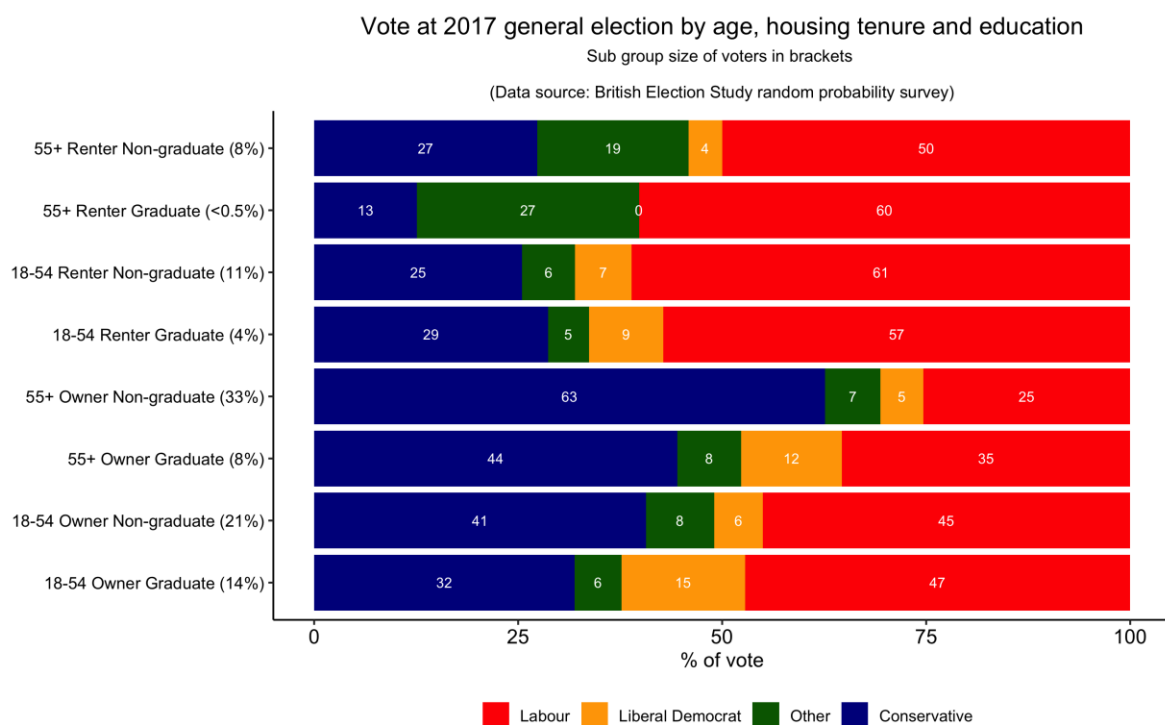


Figure 19: Share of votes for the major parties at 2017 general election by age-education-tenure sub-group, excluding non-voters (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2017)

First, the inclusion of non-voting in Figure 20 transforms the picture. Nearly 50% of Labour's "core" constituency (younger renting graduates) did not vote in 2019 while non-voting was even higher for young non-graduate renters (58%). This means that younger homeownership graduates were the sub-group most likely to vote Labour.

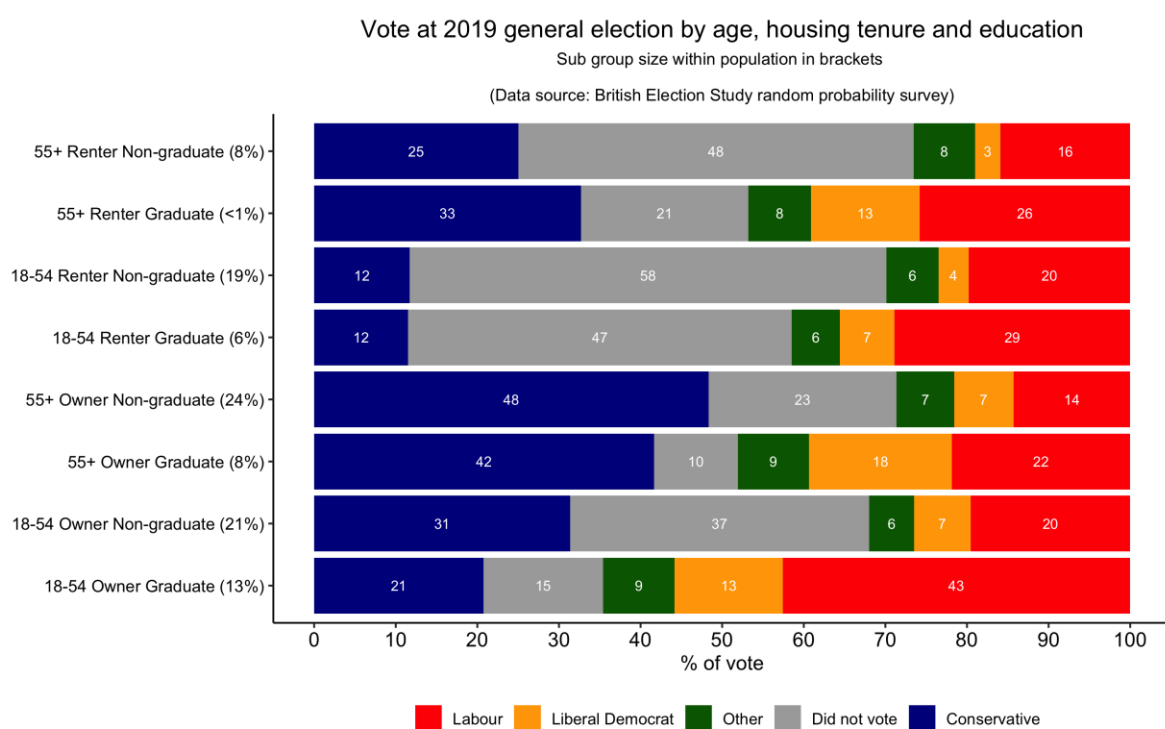


Figure 20: Share of votes for the major parties and non-voting at 2019 general election by age-education-tenure sub-group (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2019)

Comparing these figures to 2017, we can see that some of the shifts in voting patterns can be explained by turnout rather than Labour-Tory switchers. The drop from 35% of older (non-graduate) renters voting Labour to 16% is mostly the result of an increase in non-voting from 31% to 48%.

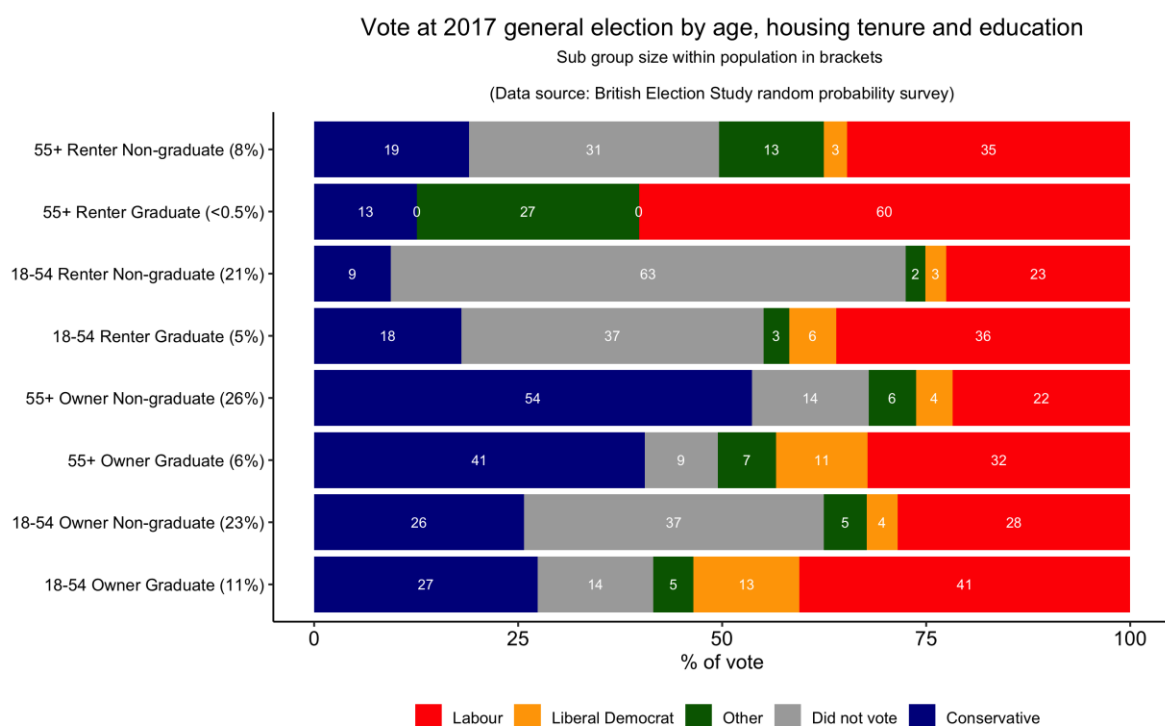


Figure 21: Share of votes for the major parties and non-voting at 2017 general election by age-education-tenure sub-group (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2017)

To account for the absolute size of each sub-group, we can also look at the share of Labour voters as a percentage of all voters from 1992-2019. Figure 22 shows that graduates have been gradually replacing non-graduates in Labour's electoral coalition but still represent a minority of Labour voters. The different sub-groups look more evenly split when viewed through this lens, although again, younger homeowners graduates comprise the most significant sub-group of Labour voters.

On the other hand, the caricature of Labour voters as younger, university-educated *renters* is a considerable exaggeration of their size in the population and tendency to turnout – roughly 3% of (all) voters fitted this description in 2019. The decline of older renters as a part of the Labour coalition – both due to socio-demographic change and voting patterns – is also noticeable as a long-term trend.

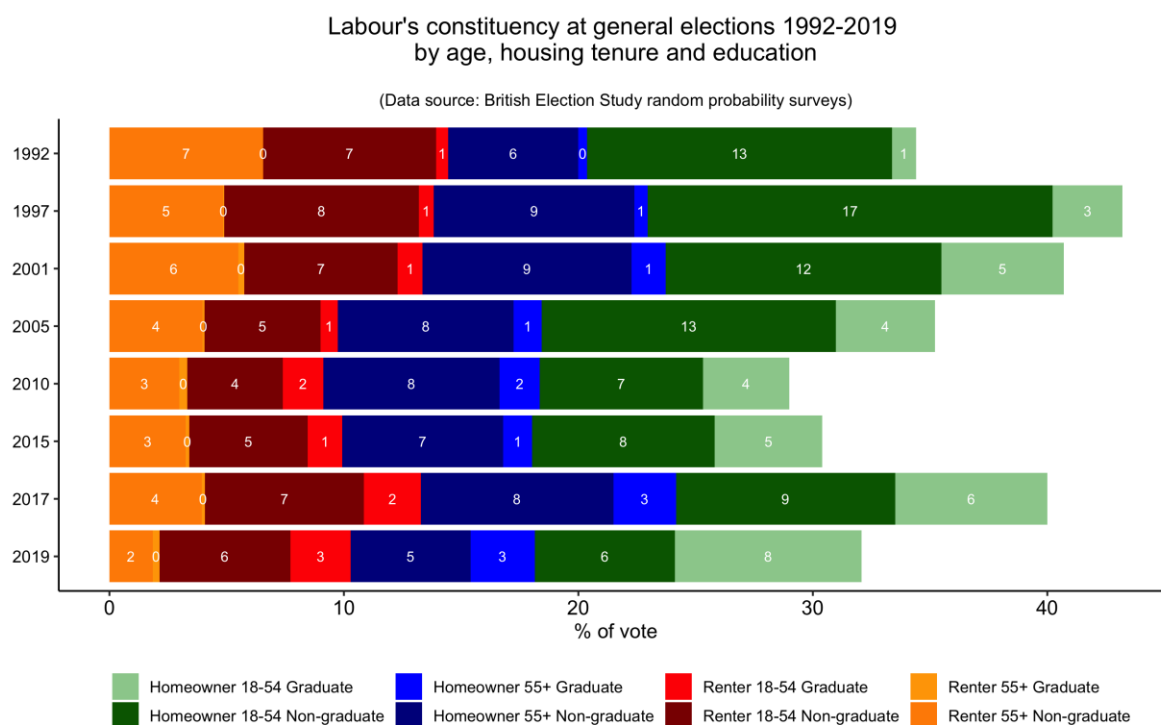


Figure 22: Labour vote share at general elections 1992-2019 broken down into age-education-tenure sub-groups (Source: British Election Study random probability surveys)

Meanwhile, Figure 23 shows the changing shape of the Conservative coalition over this time. Interestingly, the home-owning baby boomers who propelled John Major to victory in 1992 (when they were under 55) are now the bedrock of the Tory coalition as they age. Their size and significance are such that in 2017, just under half of the Conservative Party's voters were homeowners over the age of 55 without degrees.

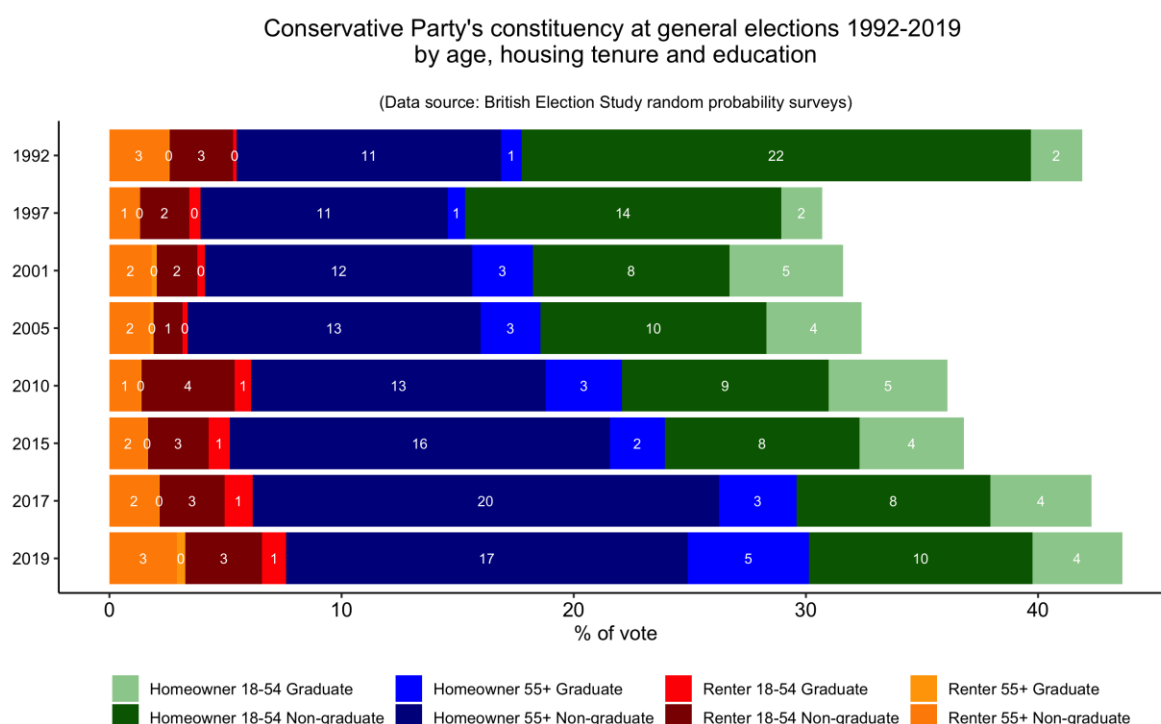


Figure 23: Conservative vote share at general elections 1992-2019 broken down into age-education-tenure sub-groups (Source: British Election Study random probability surveys)

To examine the underlying preferences that could be driving these voting patterns on the demand-side, we use a battery of British Election Study left-right questions for 2019 to create a mean left-right/authoritarian-libertarian position for each age-education-tenure sub-group. Figure A6 provides an indication of the left-right & libertarian-authoritarian variables used.²⁹

Figure 24 shows the position of the 8 sub-groups on a 2-dimensional axis combining economic and social/cultural preferences. Firstly, the assumed core Labour vote is unsurprisingly young graduates who are left-libertarian (bottom left quadrant). The assumed core Conservative vote based on these preferences would be (young and old) owner non-graduates, who are right-authoritarian (top right). The Labour core is as expected based on voting patterns but the inclusion of younger homeowners non-graduates in the Conservative core is less in tune with recent voting patterns.

Meanwhile, cross-pressured groups are (young and old) non-graduate renters as left-authoritarian (top left) and older graduates as right-libertarian (bottom right). Younger sub-groups are consistently more socially/culturally libertarian and economically left-wing than their equivalent older sub-group, although younger and older non-graduate renters have indistinguishable positions on the economic left-right scale. As argued above, key imbalances for Labour are demographics and non-voting. The top right Tory-friendly quadrant, owner non-graduates, make up c.48% of voters, while the bottom left Labour quadrant, young graduates, are only c.21%.

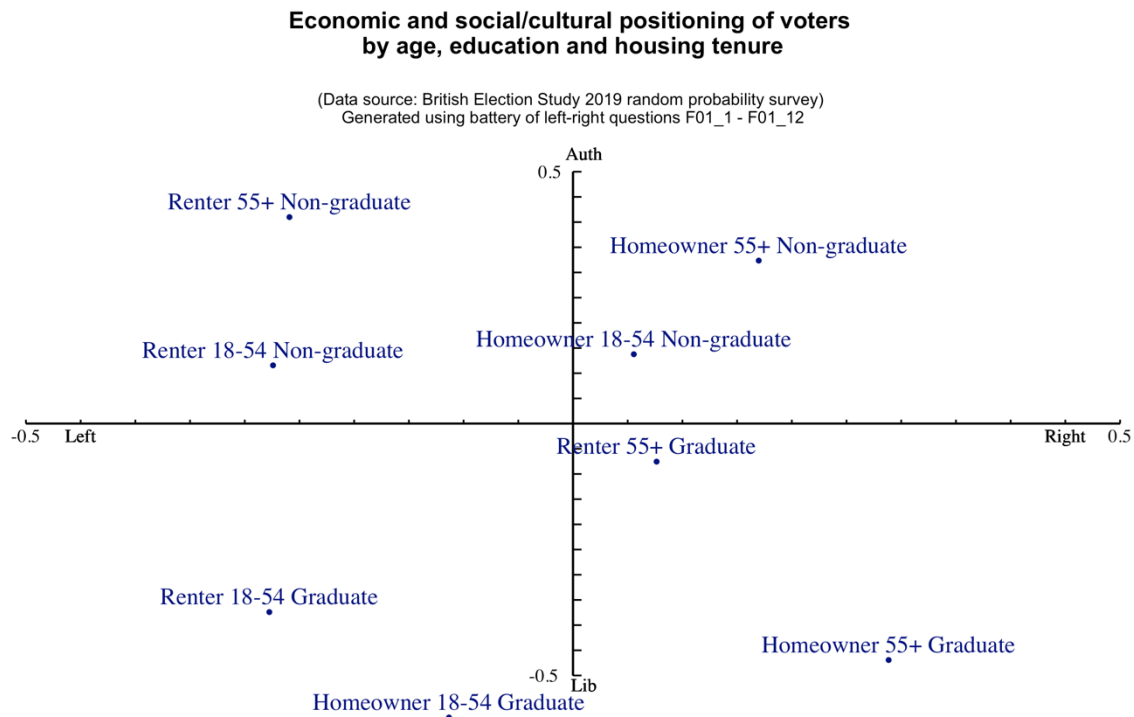


Figure 24: Two-dimensional axis showing the economic and social/cultural positioning of voters by age-education-tenure sub-groups

This 2-dimensional approach is stylised to tell a simple story about a complicated set of values/preferences that voters might have. However, sometimes this complexity matters, and the survey items we use may seem a little dated for contemporary political fault lines. Thus, we can also focus in on specific survey questions in British Election Study surveys to see how this changes the divides by sub-group.

While abstract questions on redistribution mirror the distribution of economic left-right preferences seen in the 2-dimensional axis (see Figure A7), when redistribution is framed in terms of increased tax and social spending, older homeowners are very supportive. Figure 25 shows that older homeowners are *most* likely to want to increase taxes and spend more. A simple explanation would be that this is because they do not expect to pay much of the tax and rely more on the types of services the state increasingly provides. But it also points to an explanation of why the current Conservative government is presiding over tax rises and spending commitments, beyond a simple 'shift to the left' narrative. These voters are not ostensibly left-wing on most issues but they do support public services and are not averse to tax rises where they expect them to land: on working-age people.

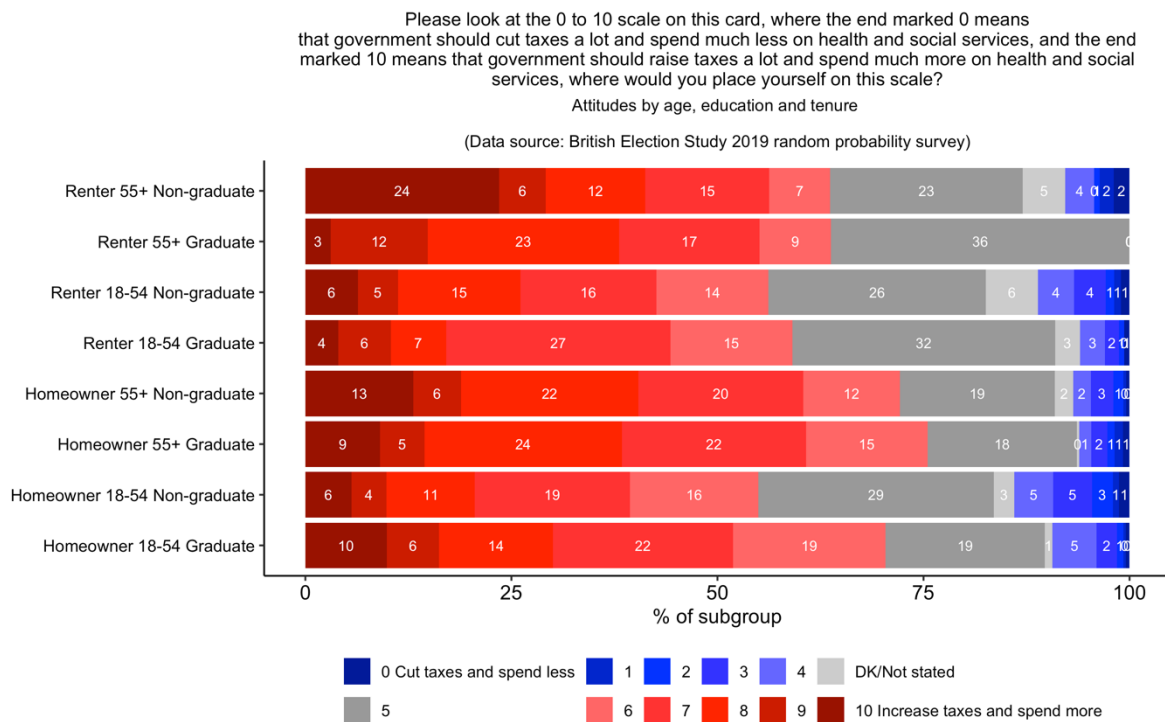


Figure 25: Tax and spend preferences by age-education-tenure sub group (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2019)

On the other hand, echoing research that suggests the politics of welfare and conditionality reflects the cultural dimension as much as economics³⁰, scepticism about welfare seems best explained by educational divides rather than housing tenure or age. Figure 26 shows attitudes to the idea that welfare is too generous. The contrast between younger homeowners depending on whether they are graduates or not is striking.

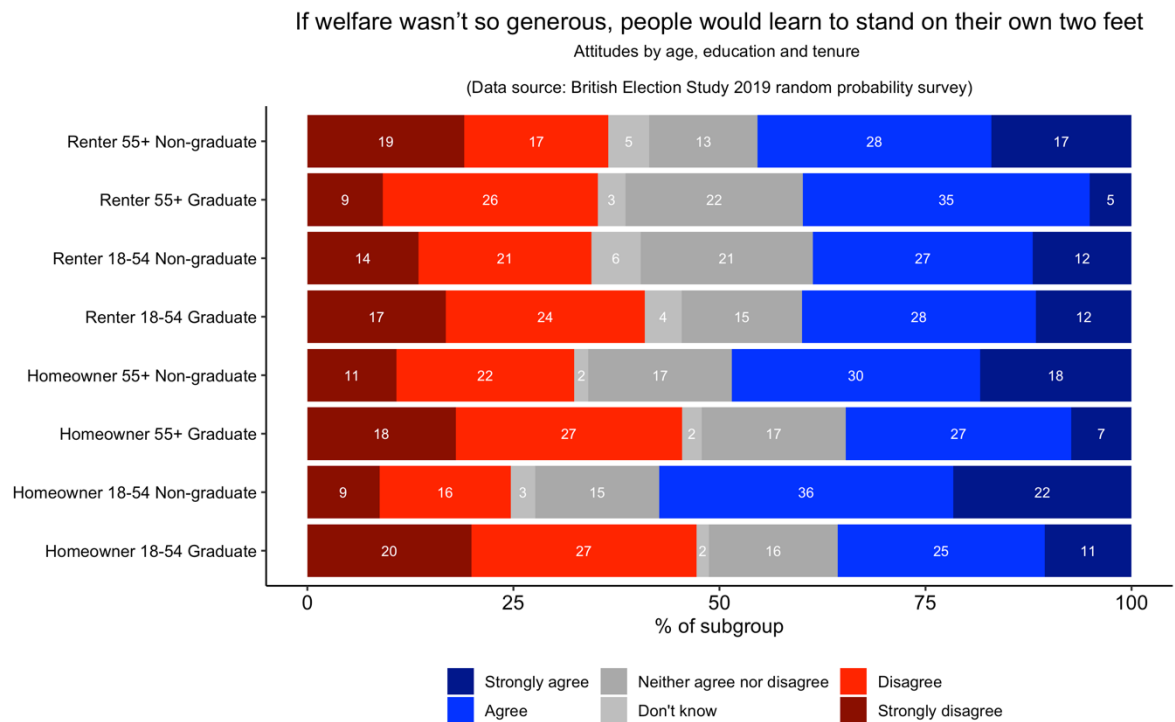


Figure 26: Welfare attitudes by age-education-tenure sub group (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2019)

As the British Election Study battery of items for the social/cultural dimension does not include a question on immigration, we examine these in Figure 27, which shows whether respondents thought immigration was good or bad for the economy. Again, education is the most important predictor of these attitudes, even if those most likely to have negative rather than positive attitudes to immigration are older non-graduate renters.

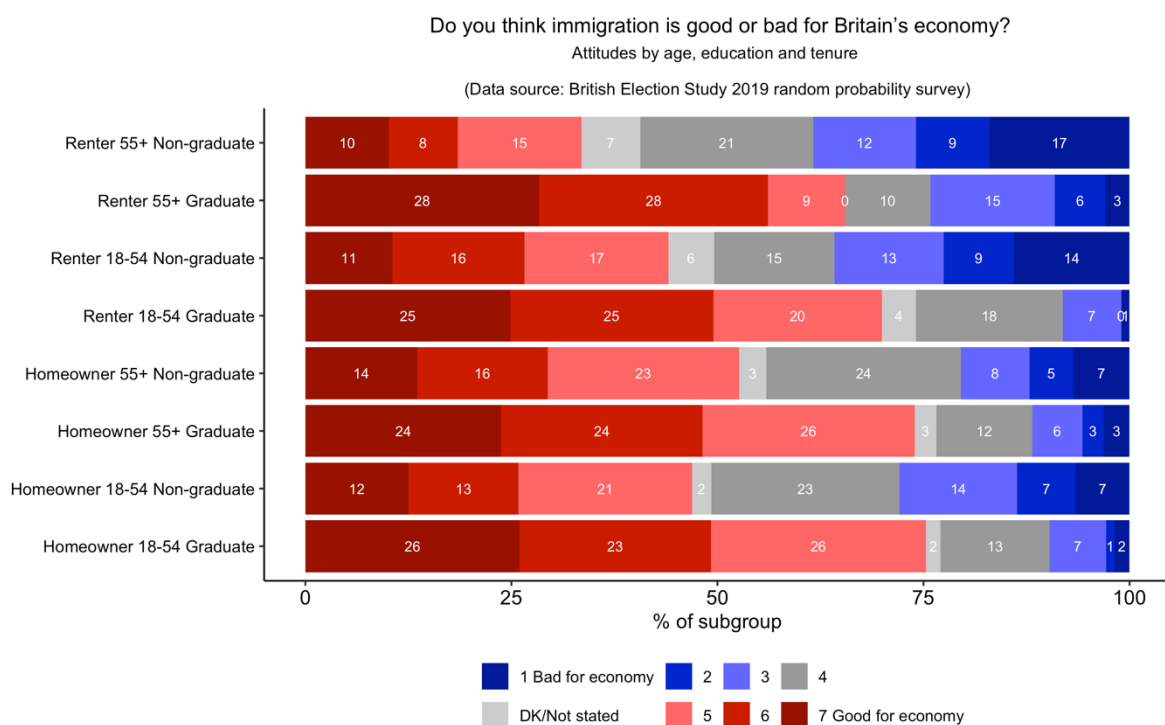


Figure 27: Immigration attitudes by age-education-tenure sub group (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2019)

Finally, we examine attitudes to the trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth. Figure 28 shows a surprisingly low level of polarisation on this issue according to these sub-groups, with a majority of every group prioritising environmental protection.

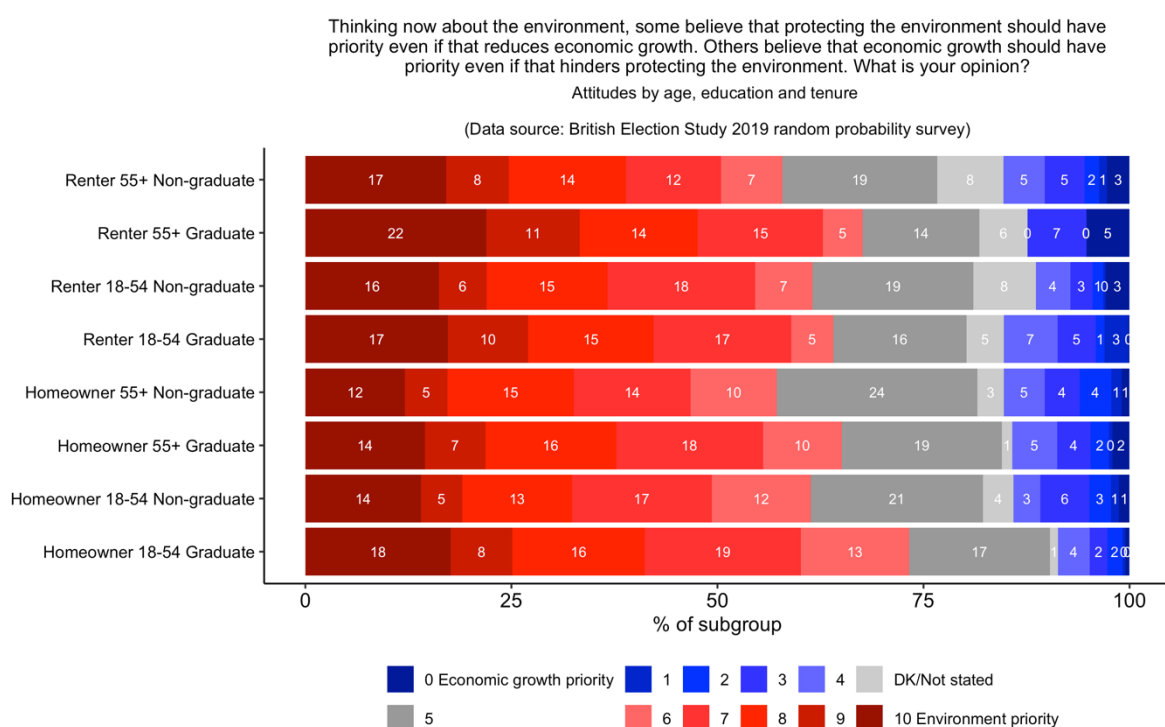


Figure 28: Environment vs. growth attitudes by age-education-tenure sub group (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2019)

Conclusion: towards a political economy of older voters and the age divide

In much of the analysis of the Brexit referendum and the 2017 and 2019 general elections, the votes of older people have been considered largely reactionary, as an expression either of socially conservative values pitted against the liberalism and cosmopolitanism of younger voters, or the perspective of places in decline and 'left behind'. Relatively little attention has been paid to whether older voters have distinct interests and political preferences by virtue of their position in the lifecycle and/or the material circumstances of the particular cohorts to which they belong – and whether the wealth and assets of older people help explain the age divide in British politics.

In the previous sections of this paper, we have explored the material interests of older voters, and shown that home-owners aged over 55, who make up over 75% of their age cohort, have strong and consistent preferences for voting Conservative. The work of Green and Raluca L. Pahontu has similarly demonstrated that wealthier individuals were more likely to vote for Brexit. These arguments suggest that we cannot account for the age divide in political preferences simply by reference to values divides between the generations. Whilst such divides undoubtedly exist, it is important to examine the inter-relationship of identities and values with economic and social class formations.

Evidence from the Bank of England, as well as research institutes such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Resolution Foundation, has found that older people have benefited disproportionately from both monetary and fiscal policy in the post-financial crisis era.³¹ Older homeowners have seen their housing and pension wealth increase as a result of Quantitative Easing, while the austerity enacted by the Coalition and Conservative governments gave relative protection to the social security entitlements enjoyed by older people at the expense of those of the working age population. Despite the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the health of older people, these patterns of relative economic disadvantage for the young – particularly those from working class backgrounds – look set to persist.

At the 2019 General Election, there was a narrowing of the age gap in turnout and a shift in support towards the Conservatives by older renters and non-graduates. Turnout amongst these two groups also fell, as it did overall for older voters, while that of younger voters increased. This suggests that the turnout and voting preferences of older voters, in particular, cannot simply be read off from their material interests: preferences for Brexit, attitudes towards Labour, and other factors – including a drop off in turnout that might be attributable to a winter election – account for the shifts in older people's voting patterns at the 2019 election.

Nonetheless, while the turbulence of recent political events has created many 'supply side' explanations for political change – and opened up considerable space in which challenger parties can operate – the 'demand-side' of voters' preferences has focused too much on the cultural values of older voters and 'left behind' places, and not enough on the relative prosperity of the older population and the means by which they have secured their economic interests since the financial crisis. On this account, political inequalities – in registration, turnout and partisan preferences – mean that older voters are better able to advance their interests than the young.

Appendix

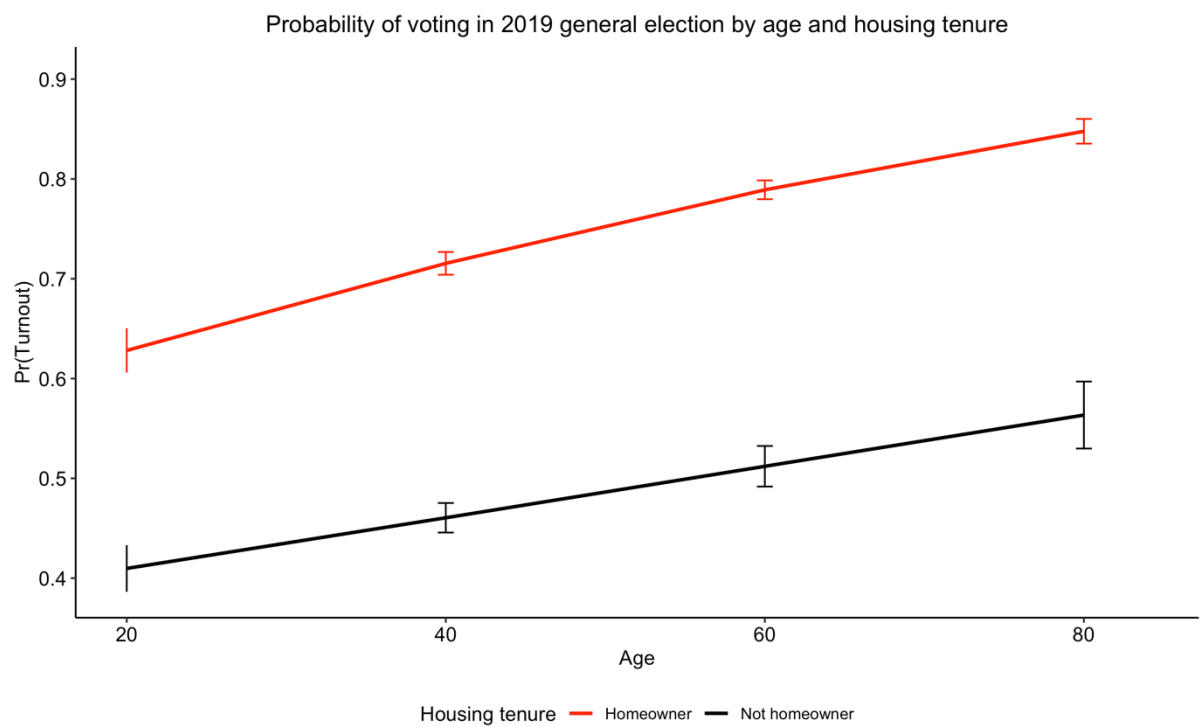


Figure A1: Probability of Voting in 2019 General Election by age and housing tenure (Source: 2019 BES Post-Election Random Probability Survey)

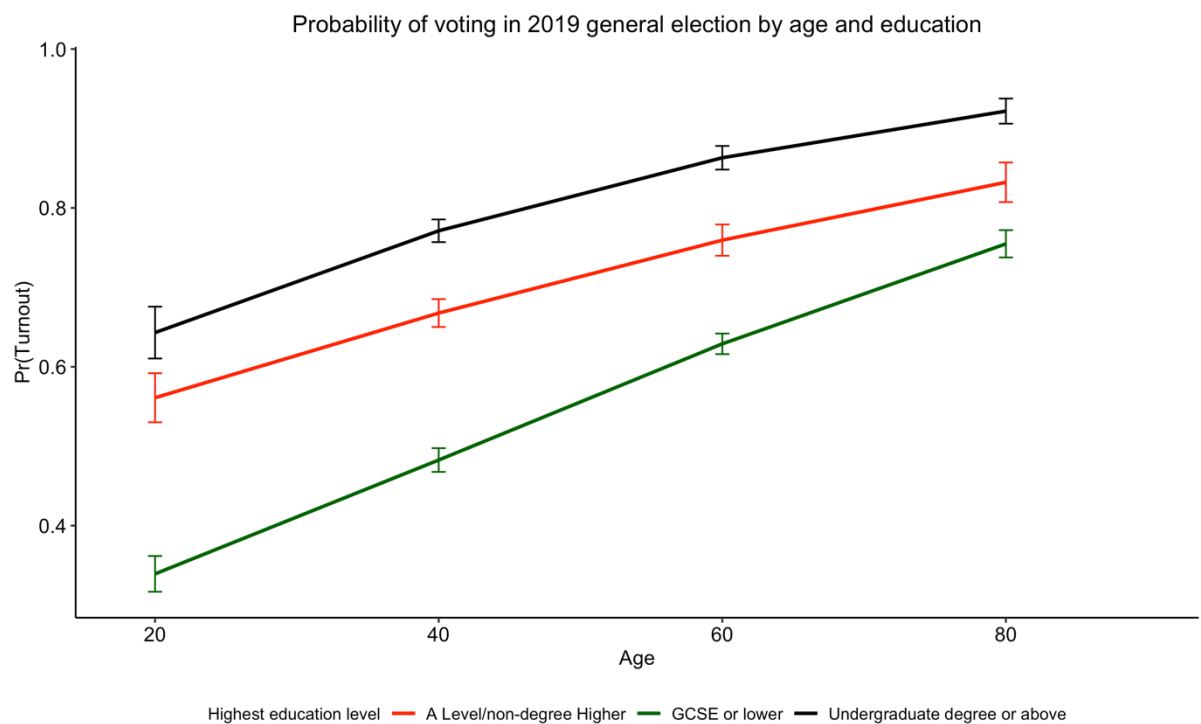


Figure A2: Probability of voting in the 2019 General Election by age and education (Source: 2019 BES Post-Election Random Probability Survey)

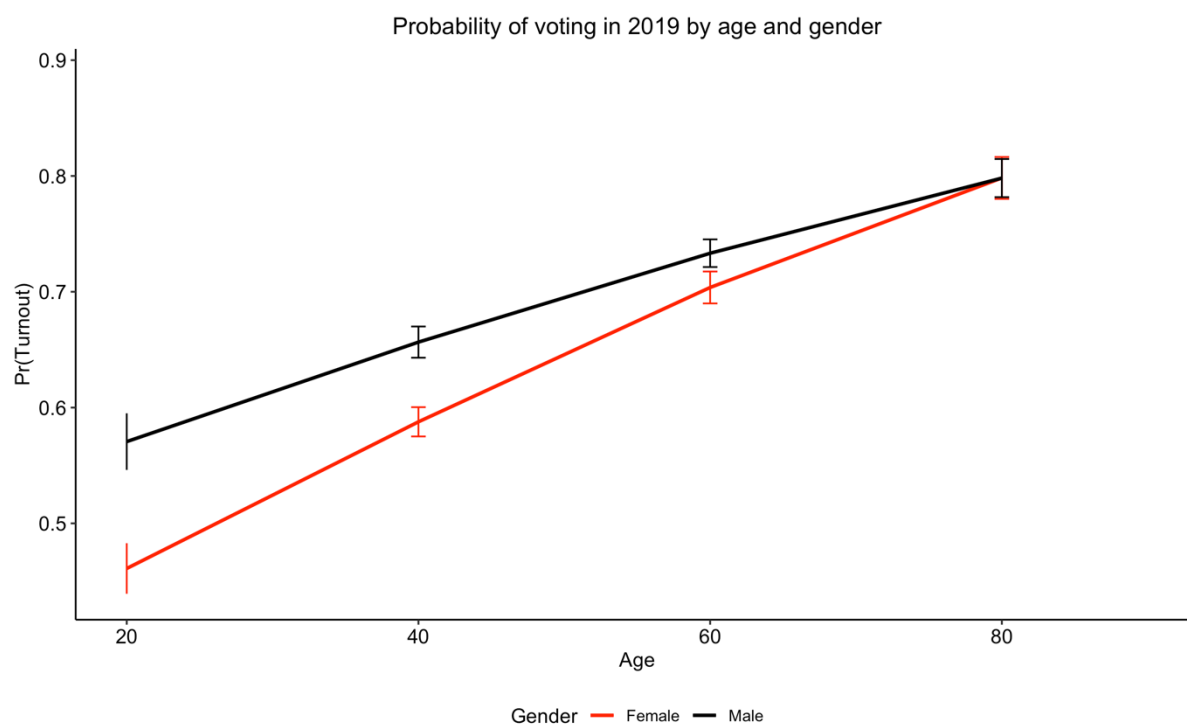


Figure A3: Probability of voting in 2019 by age and gender (Source: 2019 BES Post-Election Random Probability Survey)

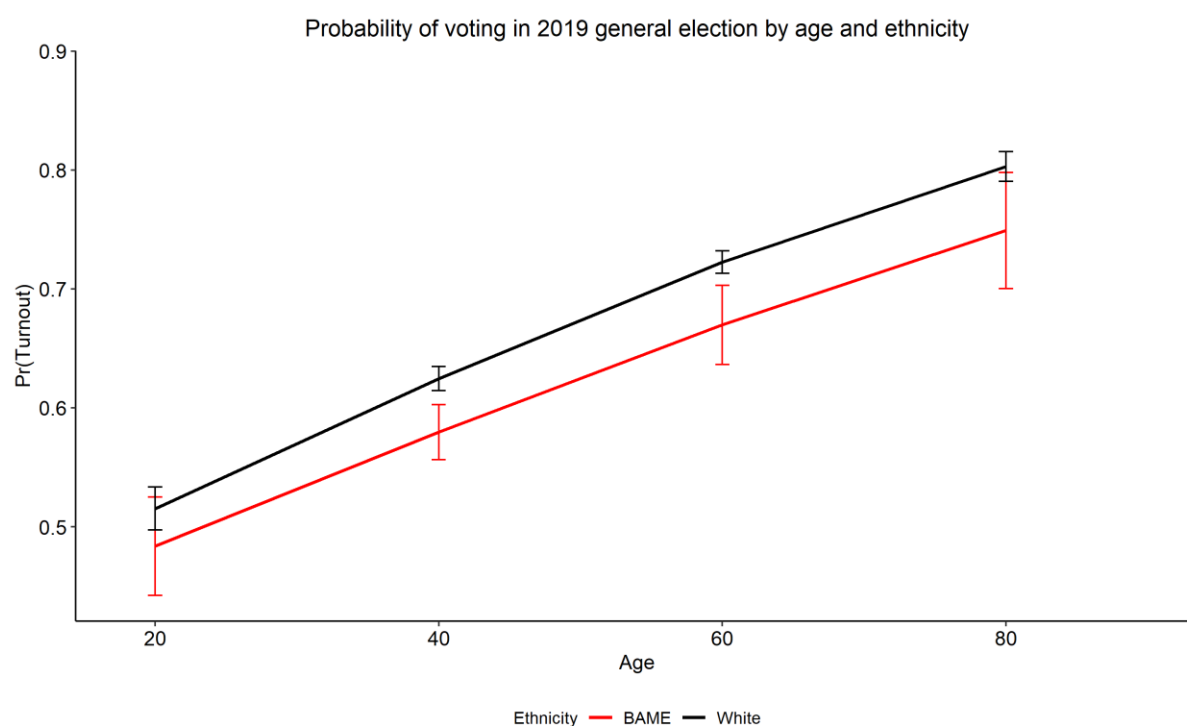


Figure A4: Probability of voting in 2019 by age and ethnicity (Source: 2019 BES Post-Election Random Probability Survey)

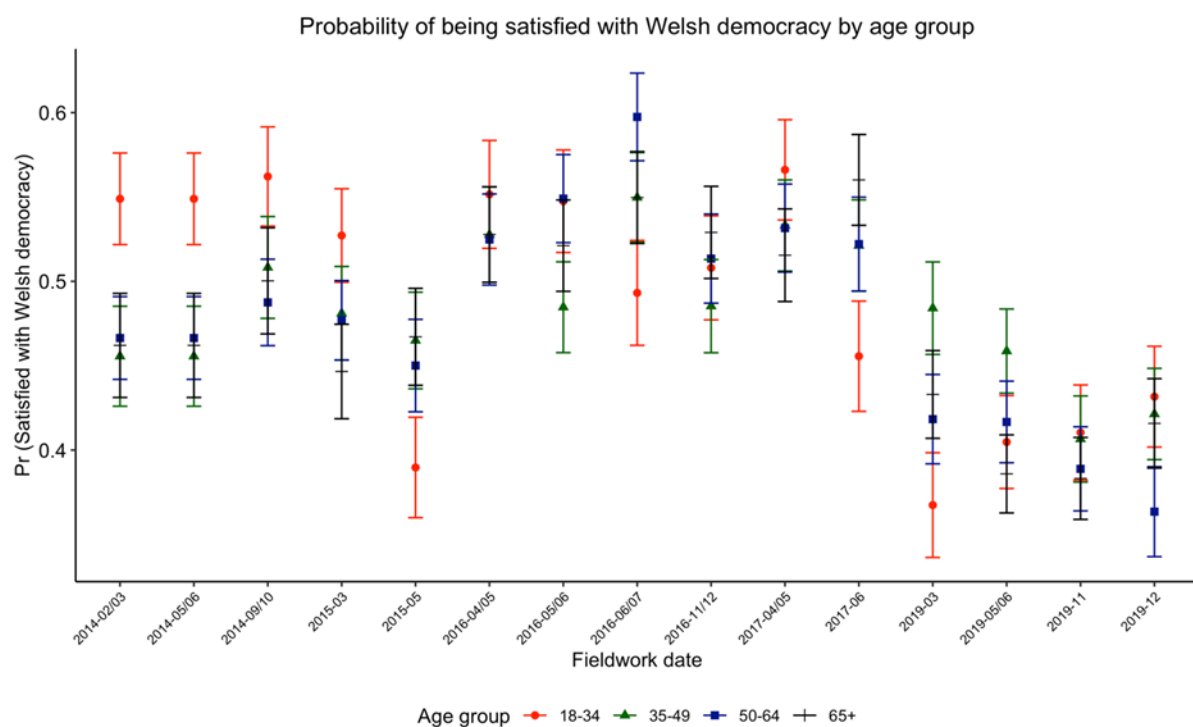


Figure A5: Probability of being satisfied with Welsh democracy by age group (Source: British Election Study Internet Panel Survey)

E: Left-Right

F01: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Do you ... (Modes: CAPI/Online/Paper. Countries: England/Scotland/Wales.)

Sub-variables:

- F01_1: Ordinary working people get their fair share of the nation's wealth
- F01_2: There is one law for the rich and one for the poor
- F01_3: Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values
- F01_4: Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards
- F01_5: There is no need for strong trade unions to protect working conditions and wages
- F01_6: Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems
- F01_7: Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership
- F01_8: Govt's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one
- F01_9: People should be allowed to organise public protests against the government
- F01_10: People in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lives
- F01_11: For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence
- F01_12: People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences

Value	Label
-999	Not stated
-1	Don't know
1	Strongly disagree
2	Disagree
3	Neither agree nor disagree
4	Agree
5	Strongly agree

Figure A6: Left-right questions in British Election Study data

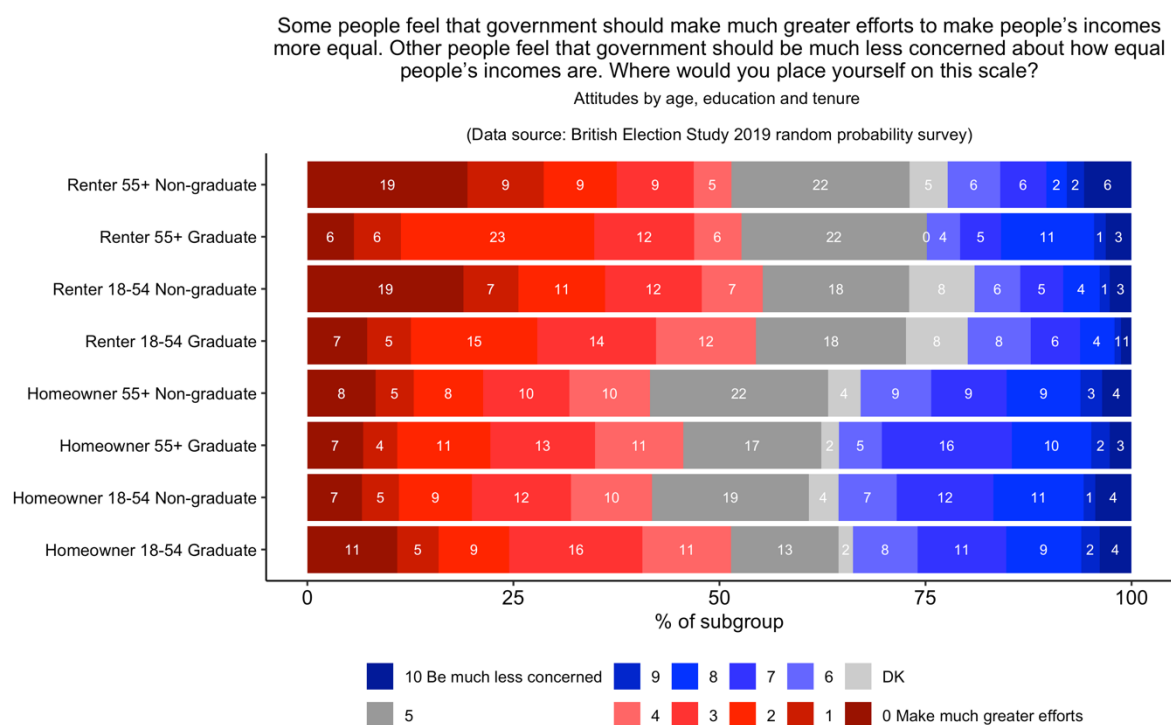


Figure A7: Redistribution preferences by age-education-tenure sub group (Source: British Election Study random probability survey 2019)

¹ Lord Ashcroft, How did this result happen? My post-vote survey, 2017, accessed 17th May 2019 at <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2017/06/result-happen-post-vote-survey/>; C. Curtis, How Britain Voted at the 2017 General Election, YouGov, 2017, accessed on 17th May 2019 at <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/06/13/how-britain-voted-2017-general-election>; D. Phillips, J. Curtice, M. Phillips and J. Perry, J. (eds.) British Social Attitudes: The 35th Report, London: The National Centre for Social Research, 2018; British Election Study Team, Age and voting behaviour at the 2019 General Election, accessed 15th February 2021 at https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/age-and-voting-behaviour-at-the-2019-general-election/#.YCqC_DJxeUI

² T. Bell. and L. Gardiner, My Generation, Baby: The Politics of Age in Brexit Britain, in in G Kelly and N Pearce (eds) Britain Beyond Brexit, *The Political Quarterly*. Vol 90, Issue 2, 2019, pp 128 – 141; J. Tilley and G. Evans, The New Politics of Class after the 2017 General Election, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol 88, Issue 4, 2017, pp 710-15.

³ J Chrisp and N. Pearce., Grey Power: Towards a Political Economy of Older Voters in the UK, *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 90, Issue number 4, 2019 pp 743-756

⁴ Before the UK left the EU, residents over the age of 18 (except prisoners or members of the House of Lords) who were citizens of the Republic of Ireland, Malta and Cyprus could vote in UK Parliamentary elections, but not other EU citizens. The same eligibility rules that applied to UK Parliamentary elections were used for the Brexit referendum (with the addition of residents of Gibraltar) but not the referendum on Scottish independence, in which EU citizens and 16 and 17 year olds were entitled to vote.

⁵ J. Chrisp and N. Pearce, *The Rise of the Grey Vote*, Institute for Policy Research, 2019, accessed at 21st May 2019, <http://blogs.bath.ac.uk/iprblog/2019/05/21/the-rise-of-the-grey-vote/>. These gaps may have narrowed more recently because of outward migration from the UK of EU nationals. See M. O'Connor and J. Portes, *Estimating the UK population during the pandemic*, ESCoE Blog, January 2021, accessed 5th March, 2021 at [Estimating the UK population during the pandemic - ESCoE : ESCoE](#)

⁶ C. Prosser, E.A Fieldhouse, J.Green, J. Mellon, and G.Evans, Tremors But No Youthquake: Measuring Changes in the Age and Turnout Gradients at the 2015 and 2017 British General Elections, *SSRN* January 28, 2018, ; J. Mellon, G. Evans, E.A. Fieldhouse, J.Green, and C. Prosser, Aggregate Turnout Is Mismeasured, *SSRN*, January 8, 2018. But see also W. Jennings and P. Sturgis, 'Why 2017 may have witnessed a youthquake after all', LSE British Politics and Policy, 2018; <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/was-there-a-youthquake-after-all/> (accessed 18 June 2019).

⁷ Due to the coronavirus pandemic, this post-election survey includes both online and face-to-face survey respondents.

⁸ Turnout estimates when only including respondents from a face-to-face survey are all within 1% of the overall RPS estimates displayed in Table 1.

⁹ Chrisp and Pearce, The Rise of the Grey Vote

¹⁰ As internet surveys consistently over-estimate turnout, we re-weight the estimates to match official turnout at the national level.

¹¹ F2F-only estimates are all within 1% of the RPS estimates except for 18-34 & 35-49 Conservative vote share (23.6% and 38.6% respectively).

¹² J.Mellon, G. Evans, E.A. Fieldhouse, J. Green, and C. Prosser, Brexit or Corbyn? Campaign and Inter-Election Vote Switching in the 2017 UK General Election. *SSRN*, February 2017, 719–737.

¹³ Phillips et al, 'British Social Attitudes'

¹⁴ Fieldhouse, Edward A. and Evans, Geoffrey and Green, Jane and Mellon, Jonathan and Prosser, Christopher, Volatility, Realignment and Electoral Shocks: Brexit and the UK General Election of 2019 (January 12, 2021). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3764477> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3764477>

¹⁵ R. Inglehart and P. Norris, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019

¹⁶ Sobolewska, M., & Ford, R., *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid, ch 2

¹⁸ Ibid, ch 2

¹⁹ J. Gingrich and S. Häusermann, The decline of the working-class vote, the reconfiguration of the welfare support coalition and consequences for the welfare state, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 2015

²⁰ L.Azzolini and G. Evans, *How Party Ideological Convergence accentuates Class differences in Voter Turnout: the Role of Age and Values*, Nuffield Elections Unit, Working Paper, no 1, 2020 accessed on February 16th, 2021 at [IdeologicalconvergenceandclassturnoutWorkingPaper.pdf](https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2018/05/A-New-Generational-Contract-Full-PDF.pdf)

²¹ Ibid pp28-29

²² T. Iversen & D. Soskice, *Democracy and Prosperity*. Princeton University Press, 2019;

²³ Ibid, p235

²⁴ W. Jennings and G. Stoker, The Divergent Dynamics of Cities and Towns: Geographical Polarisation and Brexit. in G Kelly and N Pearce (eds) Britain Beyond Brexit, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol 90. Issue 2, 2019, pp 155-66.

²⁵ Resolution Foundation, A New Generational Contract: Final Report of the Intergenerational Commission, London: Resolution Foundation, 2018, accessed on 17th May 2019 at <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2018/05/A-New-Generational-Contract-Full-PDF.pdf>

²⁶ Jane Green and Raluca L. Pahontu, Mind the Gap: Why Wealthy Voters Support Brexit, (January 12, 2021). Accessed 16th Feb, 2021 at SSRN <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3764889>

²⁷ Ibid, p22

²⁸ B. Ansell. and D. Adler, Brexit and the Politics of Housing in Britain, in G Kelly and N Pearce (eds) Britain Beyond Brexit, *The Political Quarterly*. Vol 90, Issue 2, 2019, p111-112.

²⁹ Questions F01_1, F01_2, F01_5, F01_6, F01_7, F01_8 here are used for (economic) left-right & F01_3, F01_4, F01_9, F01_10, F01_11, F01_12 are used for (social/cultural) authoritarian-libertarian positions.

³⁰ David Attewell, Redistribution attitudes and vote choice across the educational divide, *European Journal of Political Research*, 2021

³¹ P. Bunn, A.Pugh and C.Yeates, (2018) *The distributional impact of monetary policy easing in the UK between 2008 and 2014*, Staff Working Paper No. 720, March 2018, London: Bank of England; A. Hood and T.Waters, *Incomes and inequality: the last decade and the next parliament*, Institute for Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN202, 2017, accessed on 20th May 2019 at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/BN202.pdf>; Resolution Foundation, op cit.



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